IV
Tearmoon Empire
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1.2.3…

Characters

Tearmoon Empire

Granddaughter and Grandmother

Archnemesis

Mia

Protagonist. The sole princess of the empire. Ex-selfish brat. Actually a coward. A revolution leads to her execution, but she somehow leaps back through time and wakes up a twelve-year-old again. She successfully avoids a repeat encounter with the guillotine, but then Bel shows up...

Miabel

Mia's future granddaughter who leapt backward through time. Goes by "Bel."

Revolution

Archnemesis

Outcount Rudolvon's Family

Ludwig

Young, motivated government official. Sharp tongue. Ardently believes in Mia and is trying to make her empress.

Archnemesis

Anne

Mia's maid. Born into a poor family of merchants. Mia's loyal subject.

Tiona

The eldest daughter of Outcount Rudolvon. Looks up to Mia. In the previous timeline, she led the revolutionary army.

Cyril

Tiona's younger brother. Super smart.

Liora

Tiona's maid.

Dion

The strongest knight in the Empire. In the previous timeline, he was Mia's executioner.

Ruby

The daughter of the Duke of Redmoon. A gallant lady with a wardrobe to match.

Esmeralda

The eldest daughter of the House of Greenmoon. Self-proclaimed best friend of Mia.

Sapphias

The eldest son of the House of Bluemoon. Got into the student council thanks to Mia.

The Four Dukes' Families

※ ——— Future Timeline Relationship

※ ····· Previous Timeline Relationship

Kingdom of Sunkland

Keithwood

Prince Sion's attendant. A cynic. But a competent one.

Sion

ASSISTANCE

Crown Prince. All-round genius. In the previous timeline he was Mia's archnemesis, aided Tiona and eventually became known as the "Penal King." In the present he accepts that Mia is the Great Sage of the Empire.

[Wind Crows] Sunkland's intelligence service.

[White Crows] A team within the Wind Crows formed for a certain project.

Holy Principality of Belluga

SUPPORT

Rafina

The Duke's daughter. Saint-Noel Academy's student council president and the school's de facto decision maker. In the previous timeline, she supported Sion and Tiona from behind the scenes. Her smile can be lethal.

[Saint-Noel Academy]

A super elite school attended by all the highborn children of neighboring nations.

Kingdom of Remno

SUPPORT

Abel

Second Prince. In the previous timeline, he was known to be an extraordinary playboy. Now, as a result of meeting Mia, he works to diligently improve his swordsmanship instead.

[Forkroad & Co.]

Chloe

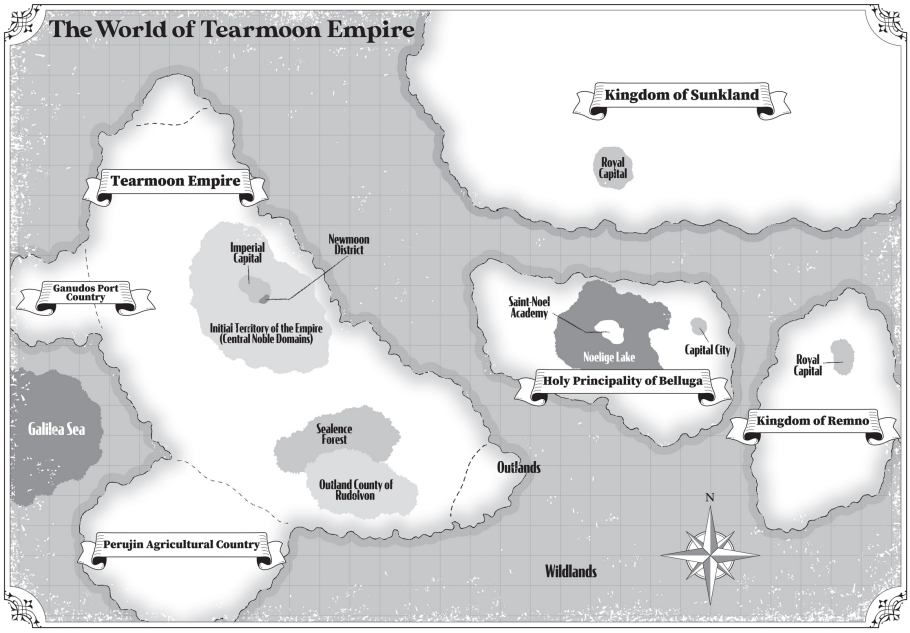
The only heir of Marco Forkroad, whose company spans multiple kingdoms. She is Mia's classmate and book buddy.

Chaos Serpents

A group of chaosmongers trying to wreak havoc upon the world. They are deeply hostile toward the Holy Principality of Belluga and the Central Orthodox Church. Traces of their clandestine misdeeds can be found throughout history, but the details are shrouded in mystery.

Story

Mia, the reviled selfish princess of the fallen Tearmoon Empire, is executed, only to wake up a twelve-year-old again after somehow leaping backward through time. With this second chance at life she resolves to fix the ills that plague the Empire... so she doesn't end up at the guillotine again. With the help of her previous life's memories and a healthy dose of overly-generous interpretation of her actions by those around her, she successfully averts a revolution, only to be told by her time-leaping granddaughter, Bel, that in the future Mia and her entire lineage end in ruin. As her first step toward averting this terrible fate, Mia runs for president of Saint-Noel Academy's student council and miraculously clinches the win.


The World of Tearmoon Empire
Kingdom of Sunkland
Royal Capital
Tearmoon Empire
Imperial Capital
Newmoon District
Ganudos Port Country
Initial Territory of the Empire (Central Noble Domains)
Saint-Noel Academy
Noelige Lake
Capital City
Royal Capital
Holy Principality of Belluga
Kingdom of Remno
Galilea Sea
Sealence Forest
Outlands
Outland County of Rudolvon
N
Perujin Agricultural Country
Wildlands

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Part 2: The Lodestar Girl II

Prologue: Mia's Fantasy Academy

"It truly astounds me, Your Highness, that you can't even answer questions as simple as these."

The stupid four-eyes looming over Mia looked at her like she was daft before rolling his eyes in exasperation. Mia, meanwhile, had her head down. She offered no retort. All she did—could do—was to stand there, trying hard to still her trembling shoulders. It was truly a pitiful sight to behold.

For *her*, that is! Those shoulders, you see, were not trembling from frustration...

"Oho ho ho..."

Mia looked up from the ground to meet the four-eyes's gaze. Her face was set in a wide, triumphant smile.

"Oh, but I can! These questions are simple indeed!" she declared with panache before blazing through them, answering question after question with the greatest of ease.

The posterior pair of his four eyes widened in astonishment at her performance.

"Oooooho ho ho! They're so easy I'm practically falling asleep!" She yawned for effect. "I'm surprised you even bothered giving me these questions. Oh, don't tell me... Could it be that *you* don't know the answers? In that case, shall I teach you how to get them?"

She folded her arms and, in the smuggest way possible, turned her chin up at the man behind the glasses—Ludwig.

"No, that will not be necessary," he replied with sudden deference. "I see now that Your Highness is in possession of an intellect greater than one such as myself could ever muster... With my newfound understanding of your boundless wisdom, I must humbly request that you take up the venerable role of educator at the newly-built academy."

“Oh? So, you want me to teach? Ah... Is that why you asked me to return to the capital?”

“It is indeed, Your Highness. And should you be so willing...” He took a knee and presented an ornate pointing stick to her. “This is for you.”

It was wonderfully designed with a mushroom mascot attached to the end. The second she took it in hand, her surroundings changed. She was now in a grand library with a solemn air. The vast chamber was filled with books and artfully adorned with beautiful flowers, from which a sublime fragrance wafted. Mia, an empress of boundless knowledge, was the undisputed master of this space, her presence extending from wall to wall. A flash—of light, or inspiration, or perhaps both—danced across her glasses, and she extracted a book from its row of neatly aligned neighbors.

“Hmm... This is quite the well-written book. Not that it matters much to me, since I know everything already. After all, I’m a princess of intellect, and a teacher at this academy!”

Her chest swelled with pride. The next instant, Bel appeared, a thick tome held open in her hands.

“Miss Mia, I don’t get this part!”

“Which part? Show me. Hmmm... Ah, I see. It goes like this, and this...”

“Wow! You’re so smart, Miss Mia!”

“To think that you should add to your gifts by being such a talented teacher... I, Ludwig, am humbled to the core, Your Highness.”

Soon, ranks upon ranks of people joined Ludwig and Bel, lining up to beg her instruction.

“I’m so popular... Oho ho ho! Ahhh, it feels so good it’s almost like a dream!”

Presumably, at this point, it’s not even necessary to point out that she was on to something there.

And so, as the gentle shaking of her body slowly registered in her sleep-addled mind, she quietly opened her eyes.

“Mm... Hm? Where am I?”

As her blurred vision gradually came into focus, she was faced with an unfamiliar ceiling. Soon after, Anne’s face appeared.

“Ah, are you awake, milady?” she said with a tender smile.

“I don’t... What was I...”

It occurred to Mia that her head was resting on something soft

and warm. The sensation helped her put her memory back in order, and she finally remembered what had happened. She'd lain down, head in Anne's lap, before the gentle rocking of the carriage had lulled her to sleep.

"My, I seem to have dozed off, haven't I? I'm terribly sorry, Anne. You must be tired."

"Not at all. What matters is you getting some proper sleep. I hope it was restful. I noticed you were smiling though. Did you have a particularly enjoyable dream?"

"I did indeed. So enjoyable, in fact, that I'm a little disappointed it was a dream. Oh, that reminds me!"

She shot upright and hastily pulled out her diary.

"I'd better write this down so I don't forget... It might come in handy later!"

With a furious passion, she scribbled the events of the wonderful dream she'd just had onto its pages. After documenting it in detail, she let out a sigh of satisfaction.

"I had no idea teaching others could be so enjoyable. Hm... Being a teacher might not be so bad an idea."

She recalled the missing passage from the Princess Mia Chronicles.

"Why did the part about the academy disappear, I wonder... Along with the new cold-resistant strain of wheat that never even existed in Bel's future... It's best to have as many back up plans for securing food as possible if I want to make it through the famine next year, so losing the academy and the wheat might be a real problem..."

Technically, so long as she maintained the current stockpile and secured Forkroad & Co.'s distribution routes, surviving the famine itself was probably a manageable feat. For Mia, who was, to put it nicely, extremely risk-averse, "manageable" wasn't enough to keep her from feeling uneasy.

"As for what to do about this... Hm!" She nodded to herself. "You know what? I think becoming a teacher at the academy is actually a pretty good idea! That way, whatever the problem is, I can be there to solve it myself!"

...An objective observer would point out that she might very well end up "solving" the wheat breeding project, and maybe even the academy itself, into oblivion, but neither observer nor objectivity were present at the time.

“Milady, what are you writing?”

“Hm? Oh, are you interested in this, Anne? It’s my diary, and I’m writing down the dream I just had...”

Three days later, their carriage reached the imperial capital, Lunatear.

Chapter 1: Mia Day

Upon arriving at Lunatear, Mia went to see her father and announce her return. In the meantime, Lynsha and Bel went with Anne and stayed at her home. As Mia's maid, Anne would of course come back to the Whitemoon Palace later, but she had to drop Bel off first; taking the little girl with her into the palace would invite far too many questions.

Mia, after changing into a new set of clothes in her own room, promptly made her way toward the audience chamber. As she walked, her steps began to grow heavy.

This reminds me... He threw a big fuss last time about how I have to call him "Dad," didn't he?

The realization bore down on her with a visceral weight. It felt like such a long time ago...but it was nevertheless the reason she'd departed early for Saint-Noel and shunned all opportunities to return during the holidays.

Surely, he can't still be hung up on that...

She failed to convince herself of this, and her anxieties trailed her all the way to the throne room, whereupon she discovered a surprisingly composed emperor.

"Oh, Mia, you have returned. Good, good. I pray you are in good health?"

"Thank you for your concern, Your Imperial Majesty. I arrived not long ago and am in perfectly good health."

"As I have instructed on countless occasions, you are to address me as 'Father' if you can't bring yourself to call me 'Dad.'"

"Yes, Father. I am glad to see that you are of sound health as well."

These were the usual pleasantries. She was relieved to find that he was no longer insisting that she call him Dad.

"I see... Are you enjoying yourself at Saint-Noel?"

"Yes. I have recently become very well acquainted with such figures as Miss Rafina, Prince Sion, and Prince Abel. I find that speaking with nobles from other nations broadens my perspective,

and my days with them at Saint-Noel have been most enjoyable."

The emperor, who had been nodding fondly along to Mia's account of her school life, frowned suddenly as something came to mind.

"This reminds me... That fellow you've been delegating a lot of important matters to... What was his name? Ludwig? It seems I will need to have a firm word with him..."

"...Eh?"

She blinked in confusion at his words.

"How dare he get in the way of my dear daughter's enjoyment! You were having a perfectly good time at school, and he had the nerve to call you back? Unacceptable! Given his contributions during the Remno incident some time ago, I'll spare him the gallows, but perhaps I'll order him to be banished to some penal colony in the outlands at first light..."

"Father, please stop. If anything, I am glad to be back home in Tearmoon. Moreover, I returned because I am needed here. As the Princess of Tearmoon, it is but natural for me to fulfill such duties," she said in a tone that suggested she would entertain no further discussion on the topic.

Losing Ludwig right now would be an absolute disaster, so she swiftly severed this rather disturbing stream of thought her father had been going down.

"Do you mean it? Do you really believe there is no need to punish him?"

"Yes, that is exactly what I believe."

Hearing the finality in her tone, the emperor slumped back a little and let out a long-held breath.

"So I see. Good, good... Now that your intentions are clear, I am finally free to reward him without reserve."

"...Huh?"

"Come now. Why the baffled look? You may not think much of it, but I *am* the emperor, you know? I am of course your father, but at the same time, I am also the ruler of this empire. They are often two immiscible roles, and I am forced to pick and choose which to assume for every interaction. It goes without saying that there will be times when my opinion as a father must yield to my opinion as emperor."

Mia took a moment to parse what she'd just heard. As it slowly sank in, she found herself mildly impressed.

I've always thought of my father as a hopelessly incompetent emperor, but when it comes to the things that matter, I guess he actually is giving them the proper thought...

A small trickle of admiration began to well up inside her...

"Therefore, in my role as Emperor of Tearmoon, I shall reward him handsomely for this decision."

...Only to be overtaken by a burst of sudden amusement at her father's proclamation that culminated in a bout of involuntary laughter.

"Oh, sweet moons... How did you manage to get the most important part wrong? You should be doing so not as emperor, but as my father, who is glad to see his daughter back."

"Hm? I fail to see how I am wrong. When you are here in the capital, all the people of the empire rejoice, and when you depart for Belluga, all the people of the empire despair. Therefore, as the one who orchestrated your return, Ludwig deserves my emphatic approval as emperor. The logic seems perfectly sound to me."

Silence ensued, during which the Emperor of Tearmoon leaned back against his throne with all the satisfaction of someone who'd just made a simple and incontrovertible point clear. An old friend reared its head inside Mia's, well, head, and she greeted it with dismay.

Ah, there you are, throbbing headache. I guess you've missed me.

Though she knew her father doted on her excessively, the sheer depths of his unreasonable infatuation once again took her by surprise.

Sometimes, I feel like if I just asked him very nicely to put some serious thought into fixing the empire, all our problems would be solved...

She was mere inches away from coming to a profound realization of cosmic truth, but alas, she let it go, figuring it was too good to be true.

I have to say though, he never changes, does he?

Something about the man's unbridled joy at seeing her was just too earnest to scorn. It didn't make him any less annoying, of course, but she couldn't help but feel a sliver of delight at his welcome. Maybe three parts delight and seven parts annoyance, she decided.

"Right, then. To commemorate the joyous occasion of your return, Mia, I declare that henceforth, this day shall be known as

Mia Day! For the next ten days, the whole empire shall celebrate, with festivities spanning—"

"How about we save that for next time, all right?"

Two parts delight and eight parts annoyance, actually.

Oh, but... I guess I did have him involuntarily take a hit to his reputation with the whole Bel situation...

She felt a little guilty knowing Rafina now held some baseless doubts about his character. Annoying or not, she still had a soft spot for the man.

"Father, I am of course delighted by the proposal to have the people of our empire celebrate my return, but I find myself fancying the idea of the two of us sharing a nice, quiet dinner tonight," she said with a gentle smile.

The emperor took one look at her tender expression...

"Ooooh... Oooooh..."

...And burst into tears. Like parallel cascades, they streamed down either side of his face.

"Mia... My dear Mia...wants to have dinner with me... Ooooh, what bliss! What fortune! Dinner it shall be then! I will have the chefs prepare the most extravagant of culinary masterpieces! And I will have the soldiers burn down the forests so we will have the freshest and tenderest of naturally grilled hare—"

"Please stop. I am perfectly fine with ambermoon tomato soup for dinner, so how about we just have that?"

Final tally: one half part delight, nine and a half parts annoyance.

Chapter 2: The Curse Upon the Empire

"Welcome back, Your Highness."

After receiving word of Mia's arrival, Ludwig came to see her in the Whitemoon Palace. His expression was grave—unsurprising, considering it was at his urgent behest that she'd returned. The fact that he'd had to trouble her with his duties weighed heavily on his mind.

But I must. I have no choice. This problem might swell into a full-blown disaster. Insisting on tackling it myself would be nothing but prideful folly; I'd risk making things worse.

Upon entering the audience chamber, he came face-to-face with a somewhat weary-looking Mia. He grimaced. She must have eschewed rest to rush back as quickly as possible. The sight of her yawning as she tried to rub the sleep from her eyes pricked at his conscience like a sharp thorn.

I heard she's been quite active at Saint-Noel. Her days must have been exhausting enough as is...

When word of her unprecedented candidacy in the election for student council president first reached him, he'd broken out in a cold sweat. The way it had developed, however, surpassed even his wildest imaginations. With the odds stacked against her and defeat seemingly certain, she'd emerged victorious in a jaw-dropping reversal that felt like it belonged more in the theater than reality. What had occurred behind the scenes to bring about such an astounding result was never revealed. Perhaps there had been dealings. An agreement of some sort. Judging by how Rafina had behaved afterward, the possibility of underhanded tactics such as coercion seemed slim. Whatever it was, there seemed to be mutual consent between the two candidates.

Many had voiced displeasure with the outcome of the election. They took issue with the fact that the winner had been decided without a vote. What victory, they argued, could be gained when swords had not been crossed? To them, that was no victory; it was simply a display of cowardice.

Ludwig, however, thought differently. There were tacticians who excelled at clinching victory on the battlefield, and there were strategists who forced the enemy to retreat before the fighting even began. There were statesmen who could place their nation in a position of such diplomatic superiority as to negate the need for open conflict entirely. The way he saw it, Mia had triumphed over Rafina on the strategic front, long before the actual battle of votes began. Now that he'd had some time to think about it, the reason she'd run in the election to begin with was clear as day.

Becoming the student council president of Saint-Noel will allow her to see how the school is actually run, suggesting a desire to learn about academic administration...

The knowledge gained there could then be put to use in Tearmoon's first academy city. Vast as the continent was, there was currently only one place that could be referred to as such: Saint-Noel. If one was seeking a model—a template to reference—there could be no better choice. It all made perfect sense. Mia's thinking was exceptionally rational, and there was a clear strand of logic joining all her actions. A strand of logic which, to his great dismay, he had to temporarily sever. It frustrated him to no end to get in her way, and he cursed his own inability and relative helplessness.

"Please accept my deepest apologies, Your Highness, for calling you back here like this... I see you're quite weary."

"No, it's no problem." She yawned again. "Father was most enthused last night and would not let me sleep until I'd recounted to him all the stories he hadn't heard..."

He thought this a rather silly excuse but took it at face value, figuring she'd noticed his troubled expression and decided to inject some humor into the conversation. She yawned once more before looking at him with a slightly watery gaze.

"I didn't think you'd come all this way just to greet me. I was going to go see you later, you know? I'm aware that you're very busy."

"Not as busy as Your Highness, I'm sure, and yet I still asked you to pause your studies at Saint-Noel and make the journey home. Traveling the distance from my office to here is the least I can do."

He dropped to one knee and, his expression set in formal homage, bowed to her.

"I'm glad to see you in good health, Your Highness."

“The same to you. It’s been a long time since we’ve seen each other face-to-face, hasn’t it?” Mia’s eyes drifted upward in reminiscence. Then she looked back at him, and spoke in a soft voice. “Now then, I believe there’s something you wished to speak to me about?”

He took a moment to contemplate his response. After a brief silence, he replied, “Before we discuss that issue, there are a few things I’d like to bring to your attention.”

It wasn’t easy to get her there in the flesh, so he might as well take this rare opportunity to report on the empire’s current situation and see if she had any guidance to offer. After all, this was the Great Sage of the Empire; he had no doubt she saw clearer and further than he ever could.

“First, I’d like to report to Your Highness on the food stockpiling carried out under your orders. At the moment, it is proceeding smoothly. By my estimates, we have amassed enough that even without a single grain of this year’s harvest, we can provide our people with the bare minimum of sustenance for a full year.”

It was, of course, still an estimate, owing to the lack of transparency with regard to the personal provisions of the various noble domains throughout the empire. They did provide periodic reports, but their veracity was unclear.

“Furthermore, if we include the quantities that will be purchased from Forkroad & Co., we seem well-positioned to safely weather even a very significant famine.”

“Hm... So it’s all going smoothly, I see.” Mia nodded as she read through the parchment handed to her.

“Also, with wheat fast approaching the time for ripening, I have determined that the total yield this year will be slightly less than before.”

“Less... By how much, exactly?”

“It’s a rough estimate at best, but I’ve received reports claiming a ten percent drop compared to last year.”

“Ten percent... Hm...”

She pressed a contemplative hand to her cheek. At a glance, it didn’t seem a highly troubling number—well within the margin that could be made up for by a better harvest the following year. Moreover, decreasing harvests weren’t a rare phenomenon for the empire. Looking down on farmers was, after all, something of a

popular hobby amongst Tearmoon nobles.

The Tearmoon Empire was situated in a region historically known as the Fertile Crescent. Blessed with rich soil and a benign climate, it was perfect for agriculture. Once the seeds were sown, regular watering and the occasional weeding was all it took to see a bountiful yield. So fertile was the area that people had taken to calling it “the land of effortless harvest.”

Originally, the land was inhabited by indigenous people. They knew not the pains of famine and, absent the need for conflict, spent their days in peaceful coexistence with the world around them, working the soil and collecting its rewards.

Then came the invaders. They were a powerful tribe of hunters who roamed nearby. Thus, through weapon and muscle, the ancestors of the Tearmoon people subjugated the indigenous people and reduced them to serfs, thereby claiming the riches of the soil for themselves. That marked the beginning of the Tearmoon Empire.

The first emperor—chieftain of the tribe during their hunting days—pronounced superior those people like themselves who excelled at war and violence, and made them the nobles of the empire. Those who led lives of agricultural endeavor like the indigenous people were derided as cowards and debased as serfs. By doing so, the invaders justified their occupation of the land, providing a basis for their sovereignty.

This vile ideology proved both tenacious and pernicious, spreading from person to person and generation to generation until it took root in the very core of Tearmoon’s identity, becoming a latent bane that threatened the empire to this day. Its lingering corruption was still evident in the modern Tearmoon people—that is, the contemptuous and baseless belief that “farmers are just people who are too stupid to make a living doing anything else.”

Serfdom as a system had long since been abolished, and those who worked in agriculture no longer suffered direct institutional mistreatment. It was now recognized as a proper occupation, and farmers being oppressed for their line of work was thought a thing of the past. Blatant persecution was gone…which was exactly why the problem was severe. Possibly even worse than before.

If policies were broken, then the policies could be fixed. If their social standing was unjustly low, they could be granted titles. If they suffered violence, steps could be taken to curb it. But if the

problem was less tangible—one that seemed to do no overt harm, and originated not from reason but emotion—then the solution would be far more elusive. Fixing systems was easy; fixing *beliefs* was much harder.

"I stay away. It feels like it's not for me."

"I don't like it."

"Don't ask me why. I just know nothing good comes to those who do it."

So said the Tearmoon people of farming.

Unconscious prejudice still controlled people from within, coloring their beliefs and influencing their actions without their knowing. There was no rational basis for their views, only the irrational biases cultivated through their culture. And it was these views that perpetually kept the Tearmoon Empire from increasing its degree of self-sufficiency.

Ludwig saw this problem. He'd studied it, battled it, and witnessed the depths of its hold on the empire. So tenacious was the belief, so destructive its effects, that there were times when he couldn't help but feel a certain malice. It was as if this shapeless enemy he was fighting had a will of its own...and was determined to see the empire die by its hands.

During those times, when his mind was weary and his judgment pliant, he would think of the indigenous people his ancestors killed to conquer this land...and wonder if they had, with their dying breaths, unleashed a curse upon the empire, dooming it to a fate worse than their own. It seemed a fantastical thought utterly removed from reality, but for some reason, he could never bring himself to laugh it off. Especially when he considered that before Mia had tackled the problem, the empire had been walking on very thin ice in terms of its food supply and distribution.

He was pulled out of these thoughts by a muted remark.

"...So, it has come at last."

"I'm...not sure what you mean. What has come?" He pushed at the bridge of his glasses before continuing in a cautious tone. "I was told that the cause of the reduced harvest appears to be poor weather..."

The empire couldn't afford to lose *all* of its agricultural capacity, so official notices had been issued instructing nobles to keep the proportion of farmland in their domains above a certain threshold. There was also a growing awareness of the impending

crisis among the nobles themselves, so it seemed safe to assume they were abiding by the directives.

"And if it's just due to bad weather," he continued, "then it's quite possible we'll see the numbers return to more normal levels next year."

"No. Unfortunately, that won't happen. This is almost certainly just the beginning. Next year, the harvest will be even worse," she said, her voice infused with quiet conviction. She looked him in the eye, her gaze unnervingly steady. "If you deem it necessary, Ludwig, start distributing the wheat from our reserves. I trust your judgment."

Ludwig thought himself a rationalist. As such, any unfounded concerns Mia professed were, in theory, deserving of his admonishment. The words reached his throat, but the look of absolute certainty on Mia's face forced them back down. Instead, he replied with a silent nod.

"That concludes the preliminary reports I wished to make. Now, let us move on to the main issue at hand," he said, his solemn tone unchanged. "It's regarding the academy city project. I'm aware of how hard Your Highness labored to set it in motion, which is why it pains me to inform you that...at the current rate, I'm afraid the project will fail."

"...Huh?" Mia blinked. "The project...will fail?"

The fog of sleep deprivation that had been clouding her mind—courtesy of all the quality father-daughter time she was made to take part in last night—vanished at the news.

W-Well, then again, I sort of figured it'd be something like that.

She wasn't *too* alarmed though. Considering the contents of his urgent message and the changes to the Chronicles, she'd more or less seen this coming. With a heavy sigh, she recomposed herself and asked in a calm, deliberate tone, "And why exactly will it fail?"

Expecting the answer to be something along the lines of Viscount Berman meddling in their plans again, she was surprised when Ludwig's response proved entirely different.

"Because we're losing lecturers. One after another, they're turning down the posts they'd agreed on. Lord Bachmann, whom we'd asked to be headmaster, has backed out of the arrangement. The theological authority, Lord Hillerbeck, has as well... The school can't open if we don't have lecturers."

In order to help Mia realize her goal of establishing a new academy, Ludwig had made full use of his personal connections, gathering superior talent from far and wide. By using Mia's name to its maximum potential, fundraising had gone very smoothly, and a steadily growing list of well-respected figures had been signing on as staff. Or at least, that was how things had been the last time he'd reported to her.

"And that's not all," he continued. "Even those who aren't directly involved but had previously expressed support for the project have begun to change their tunes."

"Wh-What is going on? How come they're all turning their backs on us?" she asked, alarm pulling her out of her seat. She'd expected trouble, but not *this* much trouble.

Ludwig proceeded to detail the results of his recent investigation into the matter.

"It's not entirely conclusive...but there seem to be signs that the Greenmoons are behind this."

"Ah, Esmeralda's people. Hm..."

She crossed her arms in thought.

I remember the Duke of Greenmoon being very similar to Father in how much he pampers Esmeralda... Which means if I go through her, I can probably get him to stop—

Her burgeoning plan was quickly shattered by his next revelation.

"Apparently, all of this is being done under Lady Esmeralda's direct orders... Would you happen to know anything about this, Your Highness?"

"Under *her* direct orders?! What?!"

For a few seconds, her mouth hung open in pure shock. What followed was a period of angry gnashing of teeth.

"Hnnnnngh... What's the big idea, Esmeralda? What did I ever do to you?" Mia muttered bitterly as the image of her haughty tea buddy appeared in her mind. Her sonorous laugh echoed painfully against the walls of Mia's increasingly-aching head.

While Mia was bemoaning her friend's terrible betrayal, said friend was lying in bed, slowly waking to a very late morning.

"Aaaaah..."

With a small yawn, Esmeralda looked around with sleep-blurred eyes at the familiar room. Her lips partly slightly, and a small whisper escaped.

"What a dreadful dream that was..."

Just remembering it gave her the chills. She saw in her dream...the fall of the Tearmoon Empire. Food shortage and bankruptcy, like two anvils, slammed down onto the back of the frail camel that was an empire already burdened by revolting minority tribes and a raging plague. Surrounded by ghastly scenes of an empire in the midst of collapse, Esmeralda watched with horror as the state of the world seemed to become undone, her mood and very sanity fraying with it. In her dream, she eventually decided she'd had enough and made her way to the Whitemoon Palace. The sight of its unchanged magnificence raised her spirits, and she felt a rush of pride at her noble identity.

"Ah... Tearmoon will be fine. How foolish I was. Our glorious empire is infallible."

Feeling much better, she walked with breezy steps down the hallway, whereupon she came face-to-face with her dear friend, Mia Luna Tearmoon.

"My, Miss Mia, how do you do?"

Miss Mia was, in fact, not doing well. The air around the princess was thick with gloom. She also looked exceedingly tired. Esmeralda frowned.

My, that's hardly the way a princess should carry herself.

After a furtive roll of her eyes, Esmeralda spoke again, choosing words she assumed would cheer her friend up.

"Oh, that reminds me. I've been thinking of hosting a tea party at home, and I'd love to have you there. It'll be magnificent, and we'll invite lots of guests. Then, with everyone there, we'll all swear as proud Tearmoon nobles that we'll devote ourselves to serving the interests of this great empire of ours. There'll be lots of cake too. You love cake, right? Oh, I can barely wait. Doesn't it sound absolutely wonderful?"

Her proposal drew a smile from Mia. It seemed a genuine one.

“That…does sound quite wonderful. I’ll be looking forward to it then, Miss Esmeralda.”

“So you should. Look forward to it as much as you like, because I guarantee you won’t be disappointed.”

Seeing that her friend’s expression had brightened, Esmeralda felt a faint sense of satisfaction.

“Honestly, Miss Mia,” she continued, “you worry too much… The glorious Tearmoon Empire won’t fall because of petty troubles like these. All this doom and gloom, it’s such nonsense. Just ignore the stupid mutts that keep barking about it.”

When that failed to elicit a response, she shook her head and shrugged, as though she were dealing with a particularly stubborn child. Then she swiveled on her heels and headed back home.

That night, she was woken by someone shaking her.

“Esmeralda… Hey, Esmeralda…”

What insolence it was, she thought through the haze of sleep, for someone to be shaking her awake. She was the Duke’s daughter. How dare this person. She opened her eyes, fully ready to give the witless offender a good berating, only to find a surprisingly familiar figure standing over her in the darkness.

“Huh? Father? What’s the matter? It’s the middle of the night, for goodness sake.”

“Ah, well, I admit this is rather sudden, but you see, Esmeralda… We’re going away. All of us. The Greenmoons are leaving the capital.”

“…Huh? We’re…what? What’s going on?”

“I’m sure you’ve heard about what’s going on out there. The empire is in a dangerous position. I got in touch with some of my friends who are abroad, and they offered to shelter us, so I figured I’d take them up on it.”

“…I’m not sure I completely understand, Father, but to me, that sounds a lot like fleeing. Are you telling me the Greenmoons—we proud Greenmoons—are going to run away with our tails in between our legs?” Anger colored her brow, and she lunged to her feet. “Absolutely not! We’re one of the Four! In what do we stake our pride if not our allegiance to His Majesty? Moreover, I made a personal promise to Her Highness. We’re going to have a tea—”

“Of course, of course. I also trust the empire will eventually recover. But *we* will need to help it to do so, and we won’t be of much use if our family is in ruins. We must therefore bide our time

and gather our strength, so that we may return in greater force and drive out these mongrels." He grabbed her arm as he spoke. "Now, get moving. There's no time."

"But— What about His Majesty? And what about Her Highness?!"

"They'll be fine. I'm sure the other nobles will keep them safe and sound. In the meantime, we must cross the sea and start building ourselves up for the counterattack."

"B-But I promised! Father! I promised her! She was so happy!"

"Bah! Enough! Move!"

"Ouch! Father, no! Let me go! I—"

Thus, the Duke of Greenmoon, along with his whole family, fled overseas. Esmeralda would, on multiple occasions thereafter, look for a way to return to Tearmoon, but alas, no such opportunity ever presented itself. Ultimately, her efforts all ended in vain, and her promise to host a tea party for Mia...would never be fulfilled.

"...What a dreadful dream. Dreadful and...bizarre. Why in the moons did I have such a dream, I wonder?"

Esmeralda got out of bed and stripped off her sweat-soaked nightgown. Seeing her skin bared, a young attendant girl nearby soundlessly stepped up and helped her change into Saint-Noel's school uniform.

"You," she said, addressing the girl, "tell me something. Are things proceeding as I requested back home?"

"Yes, milady. I've received a report from His Grace. Efforts to sabotage Her Highness's academy city project are already underway."

"I see. Splendid. I'm sure she's quite upset right now... Oho ho."

She tossed her long, voluminous hair back and smiled.

"Oh, Mia. It's all your fault, you know? You were the one who didn't take me seriously. None of this would have happened if you'd just treated me with the respect I deserve."

Esmeralda Etoile Greenmoon, proud Etoiler and daughter of Duke Greenmoon, fancied herself a bosom buddy of Mia's. She considered herself both friend and rival, so Mia's recent and enduring failure to interact with her in any way, shape, or form had left her very, very unsatisfied. Whenever Mia showed up—if at all—to Esmeralda's tea parties, she'd barely stay long enough to warm her seat, and she never invited Esmeralda to any tea parties of her

own. It was all very, very unsatisfactory.

Esmeralda, you see, was very, very much a handful.

Chapter 3: Ludwig… Is Moved to the Core!

"The Greenmoons have, after all, always shown a strong inclination to look down on commoners. I suspect this is their way of protesting Your Highness's planned policy of opening the academy's doors to all people, whether noble or common. Unfortunately, a good number of nobles seem to support their stance, and the situation is rather dire."

With access to a large fleet of sailing vessels, the Greenmoons had long maintained close ties with nations across the seas. Their experiences abroad exposed their ancestors to a great deal of foreign know-how, leading to them being among the first to recognize the usefulness of accruing knowledge. Ever since then, the Greenmoons had actively invested in scholarly pursuits, resulting in their outsized influence on the empire's academic circles. The Duke's ability to sway the opinions of scholars could not be overstated. Furthermore, their stance in this matter ended up becoming a rallying cry for all those nobles who thought ill of Mia and her magnanimous attitude toward commoners. And there were a lot of them. Even for the ones who were publicly neutral, it would come as little surprise if a good number of them were secretly offering the Duke their support.

Of course, it wasn't all a pile of noxious self-importance in the Tearmoon nobility. Officials who retained some shred of morality were in favor of Mia's endeavors, and their help was what kept information about the Greenmoons' meddling flowing to Ludwig.

"And what about the rest of the Four Dukes? Any news on them?"

"Redmoon and Yellowmoon have both adopted a wait and watch approach. Only Bluemoon has pledged monetary assistance, and it's quite the sum, actually."

"Oh? Have they now? That's surprising…"

Granted, considering Sapphias was now a member of the

student council, the pledge felt like the kind of thing that carried the nuance of "Here's a little something for you. Hoping to hear good things about the boy's experience there."

"Or maybe I should see this as an attempt from the Serpents to slither closer to me..." she said contemplatively to herself. "Either way, if he's going to take my side for now, then he's more than welcome. I'll take all the help I can get."

"Indeed. Thanks to them, funding is of no immediate concern to us. As for the building itself, Viscount Berman has taken the initiative to oversee its construction, so that's proceeding smoothly for the time being as well."

"My, a second surprise. I thought for sure getting him to cooperate was going to be like pulling teeth."

She issued a silent apology to the Viscount for slandering him in her mind.

"Still... What in the moons are we going to do about this?"

"What indeed. It seems to me we have only two options. Either we persuade them again, or we start looking for new candidates."

His statement was true, but it was also far easier said than done.

"Now there are some options that *will* be like pulling teeth... I doubt there are a whole lot of potential teachers willing to challenge Greenmoon's influence— Hm? Wait a minute. Greenmoon's influence? Why do I feel like this topic came up recently... I was talking to someone not under Greenmoon's influence... Who was it again?"

With audible effort, she swam back up the recent stream of memories until she reached the one she was looking for.

Ah, now I remember. Rania's sister is a botany teacher... And the Perujin king is trying to marry her off to some noble somewhere to strengthen national ties... I wonder if she'd be willing to come to my academy to teach? Maybe if I ask really nicely...

Even from a diplomatic perspective, it seemed a far better option than marrying some random noble. After all, when it came to strengthening ties, which could be more important than the one with herself, the Princess of Tearmoon? Besides, it wasn't going to be a decades-long stint or anything. She could teach for two or three years, and if she really wanted to get married, she could just resign afterward. That way, even if Mia had to look for a replacement, she'd have much more time to do so, making

everything a lot less stressful.

Also, I need someone who can teach botany so Cyril will learn enough to develop that new strain of wheat.

The more she thought about it, the better an idea it seemed. Before she knew it, a wide grin had spread across her lips.

"Ludwig, about the whole looking for new lecturers issue. I have someone in mind whom I think would make a great candidate."

"Is that so? Who is it?"

"The Second Princess of Perujin Agricultural Country, Arshia Tafrif Perujin. I believe she studied botany at Saint-Noel...and just so happens to be looking for a place where she can put her knowledge to good use. She," Mia declared with supreme confidence, "will be the perfect addition to my academy."

Upon hearing the candidate's name and area of expertise, Ludwig drew in a sharp breath.

Does this mean... Yes, it has to... So that is indeed Her Highness's intention...

To welcome the princess of an agricultural country in the capacity of a botany teacher could only mean one thing.

The toxic belief that has been festering within the empire for so long... She means to fight it head on! This is it! She's declaring war against anti-agriculturalism!

Now that he thought about it, the best method of eradicating irrational prejudices and superstitions was indeed education. Through the academy city project, Mia intended to solve the empire's biggest problem once and for all!

Pure energy surged through every fiber of his being, as if lightning had struck him through from head to toe. His heart started racing. Goosebumps appeared on his skin. He shook, moved with excitement and admiration.

This... This *is why she is the Great Sage of the Empire! Ah, as if there had ever been any doubt... This ailing empire of ours is in steep decline, but all is not lost, for the heavens saw fit to confer upon us an angel of wisdom in the form of Her Highness!*

He regarded Mia, his wide eyes marveling at the pair of wings spreading from her back, each imbued with the celestial glow of moonlight. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he knew he was visualizing a metaphor. Probably. Either way, he felt both deeply

blessed and immensely proud to work under the direction of such a transcendent entity. So profound were the emotions welling up from within that despite himself, he broke out in a bout of rolling laughter.

"Ha ha... Aha ha ha! So that's it! Your Highness already has someone in mind. Of course."

"Well, I haven't exactly discussed it with her. Not directly, anyway. Also, we're going to need more than one teacher...and I have no idea what we're going to do about the headmaster. We have to choose carefully, since they're going to be the face of the academy... Ugh, this is going to be a headache."

Her concerns were quite legitimate. They'd planned for Count Bachmann—a renowned intellectual in the empire—to take the headmaster's seat, hoping his reputation would attract further talent. And he did, in fact, have the intended effect; a few of the lecturers signed on mentioned they were drawn by his name. This demonstrated the necessity of having a well-known figure preside over the teaching staff, to which end...

"Regarding that... I have an idea, though it might take some work. May I have your permission to handle this matter?"

"Certainly. I assume you have some candidates in mind?"

"Just one. To be honest, I had my reservations about this person, but after witnessing Your Highness's ambition and resolve, I've made up my mind. I shall meet this challenge head on."

"A-Ambition? Resolve? E-Erm, well, as long as you've made up your mind, I suppose. Who are we talking about?"

Ludwig closed his eyes. After a long, quiet moment, he said in a soft voice, "The man who taught me all I know. My master."

Chapter 4: The One to Blame…?

Let us turn back the clocks a little to when Mia was being subjected to her father's interrogation and forced to divulge every affair and episode that occurred at Saint-Noel in meticulous, sequential detail… And instead shift our attention to Bel and Lynsha, who were enjoying a modest welcoming party of sorts at Anne's home.

So this is where Mother Anne and Mother Elise lived…

The father, whose smile was so gentle, and the mother, quiet but kind, along with the carefree laughter of children… The atmosphere about the dinner table was warm and inviting, not unlike that of Bel's own upbringing.

Mother Elise…

The face of the woman who'd been like a mother to her resurfaced in her mind. The gentle wrinkles at the corners of her eyes…her calming voice during bedtime stories…and the steadfast dignity with which she entrusted the precious *Princess Mia Chronicles* to Bel… It all came rushing back to her. After Ludwig… Then after Anne… After they all died, Elise was the one who took care of her until the very end.

That was why, ever since her leap through time, Bel had longed to do this. If, she thought, she'd really managed to return to the past, then few things would mean more to her than having the chance to see Elise again.

Mother…Elise? Is that really you? I guess it should have been obvious, but you look so much younger.

As Mia's court author and writer of the *Princess Mia Chronicles*, Elise commanded Bel's undying respect. To spend her childhood with such a lofty figure had been a very peculiar experience. Elise had often lulled her to sleep by having her ride piggyback, and every time she did, Bel had found no end of comfort in those wide and motherly shoulders. As a child of Bel's age, however, exuding such a maternal aura was too tall an order for the young writer.

"Hm? What's wrong, Miss Bel?"

Elise, who'd noticed her staring, sat down beside her with a curious look. Bel had no way of knowing this, but Elise looked far better than she had before. Gone was the sickly, pallid girl, she had been replaced by a young lady of healthier complexion whose physique was, if not sturdy, at least not frail. The money Anne had been sending back, on top of her own earnings as court author, had fully ridden their family of food-related woes.

"U-Um... Is there, uh..." stammered Elise, growing a tad uncomfortable at Bel's continued staring, before something caught her eye. "Oh, excuse me for a second."

She reached toward the collar of Bel's shirt and gently brushed away a bread crumb. Then, she made a stern face and said, "Forgive my rudeness, Miss Bel, but I must remind you that it won't do for you to walk around with crumbs on your shirt. As someone who is related to Her Highness, you need to conduct yourself accordingly."

That was the moment the floodgates broke.

Aaah... It really is Mother Elise...

A torrent of emotions washed over Bel, sending alternating waves of nostalgia and fondness through her.

"Oh, uh, sorry, Moth— Erm, Elise... Can I, um, sleep with you tonight? I really want to, um, hear you tell some of your stories..."

The words streamed out of her, almost without her conscious control.

"Huh? Well, I guess— Oh, but your attendant, I thought you were..."

Elise hastily glanced at Lynsha, who shrugged her shoulders with a wry grin.

"Yeah, it's probably not standard practice for nobles to be bedfellows with commoners, but Princess Mia and milady Bel here don't seem to be sticklers for social norms. Besides, milady is a big girl, and she can take care of herself. Isn't that right?"

"I-Is that right?"

"Yes, I know how to behave. Mother Eli— Uh, I mean, my mother made sure to drill that into me."

She said so with a smug smile—the kind children often wore when they felt proud of themselves for remembering to do as they were told—which proved to be nothing but baffling for the "mother" in question.

Thus, after successfully negotiating her way into Elise's room,

Bel snuggled into the sheets and took a deep breath.

Aaaah... It smells just like Mother Elise...

The mother who had given her own life to protect her. And now she found herself in her presence again. It was the same feeling. The same embracing warmth. So poignantly familiar was the sensation that tears welled up in her eyes.

"A-All right then. Excuse me. I'm coming in."

Behind her, Elise carefully slipped in. She laid herself flat on the bed, turned her back to Bel, and all but froze in place.

"U-Um, Moth— I mean, Elise?" Bel whispered to the statue beside her.

"Y-Yes? H-How may I be of help?" Elise answered, her voice stiff with tension.

Bel had hoped to enjoy a night of hearty chitchat, but that hardly seemed possible right now. She thought back to those nights when she'd had trouble sleeping. Elise would always tell her stories in a gentle voice. They were mostly tales of adventure wholly unsuited for slumber. Some were so gripping that she thought she'd spend the whole night wide awake, while others quickly sent her off into her own wonder-filled dreamland. Having yearned to relive those priceless moments one more time, Bel found the current situation rather lacking. Her cheeks inflated with dissatisfaction, and she began to think.

Somehow, I need to make it so Mother Elise stops feeling so nervous...

After rolling some ideas around she decided to go with one of her trump cards.

"Um, Moth— I mean, Elise? Would you like to hear some stories about Miss Mia?"

"Yes! Please!"

The next thing she knew, Elise had flipped over and was staring her in the face with wide, expectant eyes.

Aha, that worked. I figured she'd be interested in stories about Grandmother Mia.

Seeing that her approach had been effective, she let out a breath of relief. Then she lowered her voice a little.

"Well then. In that case, I'll let you in on a little secret, but please keep it just between us."

Elise nodded vigorously.

"All right." Bel paused for a dramatic second before continuing.

“Did you know that Miss Mia can ride the legendary winged horse?”

“Huh? Th-The...legendary winged horse?”

She didn’t think Elise’s eyes could get any wider, but they did. Encouraged by this success, she kept going, telling the tale with such confidence that she almost started believing it herself.

“That’s right. Oh, and since it’s a *winged* horse, it can *fly*. *Whoosh!* Just like that! I mean, I’ve never seen one myself, but apparently the wings come out of its back, so it must be much harder to ride than a normal horse.”

“I-I’d imagine so. Not to mention you’d also be flying... A winged horse... Wow... I didn’t think they really existed...” Elise gulped incredulously. “And Her Highness knows how to ride them? Wow...”

“Oh, also, I heard she’s been reading ten books a day from a very young age. I tried doing it myself, but I couldn’t get past one book a day.”

“One book a day is amazing enough. Wow... I wish I lived in a place with that many books.”

Bel tactfully left out the second part of her attempt; she read one book a day...for a total of three days, then she gave up.

“Oh, oh, and there’s more. Miss Mia can dance, and when she really gets going, it’s like she’s dancing on air...”

Absorbed in Bel’s fantastical accounts of Mia’s abilities, Elise visibly relaxed. With the ice broken, the young author then offered some details about her own story that she was in the process of crafting, and the two girls kept talking long into the night—to the great delight of Miabel, who relished the chance to bask in the tender aura of her foster mother once more.

...Later that night, Elise slipped out of bed and proceeded to jot down every last detail of the story she just heard from Bel.

“Her Highness is so amazing... She’s like a treasure trove of ideas for a novel... Heck, it’ll probably be more interesting if I just tell the true story. Oh, someday, I hope I’ll have the chance to write an account of her life... I’d call it...the *Princess Mia Chronicles*...”

Mia, meanwhile, was blissfully ignorant of the fact that Elise was harboring such ominous thoughts. Which, from a mental health perspective, was probably for the best.

Chapter 5: Princess Mia… Acts in a Considerate Manner

The day after her conversation with Ludwig, Mia made her way to the Newmoon District with Bel and the others in tow. Apparently Ludwig's master was a bit of a hermit and didn't subscribe to such mundane beliefs as "having an address" and "being locatable." Since nobody knew where to find the man, they decided to leave the issue of the headmaster for later and search for other teachers first.

As for what exactly that conversation entailed, allow us to rewind the clock a tad...

"It seems easier said than done though, this finding other teachers thing..." said Mia with a frown.

"Indeed..." agreed Ludwig. "Might I propose a talk with the priest in the Newmoon District?"

"The priest?" Her momentary expression of surprise quickly changed to comprehension. "Ah... I see what you mean."

Among the educated, it was true that those of the Central Orthodox Church were significantly less susceptible to influence from the nobility. They were definitely worth considering.

"The Church already runs schools here and there, so they'd also be able to put their existing know-how to good use..." Mia said to herself contemplatively. "And, since we're planning to open the academy to the masses, maybe we can take in some children from that church orphanage..."

Doing so would give her an avenue to approach the Central Orthodox Church for financial support, potentially creating a second source of funding aside from the nobility. With that kind of money, she could then...

Her unhatched-chicken-counting was cut short by a grimace from Ludwig.

"Granted, I wouldn't place too much hope on it working out."

"Huh? How come? I'm pretty sure the priest there will be more

than happy to help us out."

"In order to realize Your Highness's plan, I've spoken to many noble families and tried to explain its merits to them. To make things easier to understand, I've always used Saint-Noel as an example, asking them to imagine if an academy city that rivaled it in size and prestige were to exist within the empire."

"Yes, I'm aware of that."

Mia had already been informed about how Ludwig was framing his sales pitch, and she understood its necessity. When persuading nobles, patriotism tended to be a direct channel to their hearts, resulting in more generous pledges. The method worked well, and as a result, the academy city project was on firm financial ground.

"At the time, I'd thought that to be the optimal approach. However, Saint-Noel Academy is, for all intents and purposes, the Central Orthodox Church's Holy Land. It's more than a school; it's a symbol of Belluga's influence and authority. That alone would make the existence of a rival problematic, but Your Highness has also defeated Rafina in the student council election, effectively ousting their Holy Lady to become president yourself. With these factors combined, I can't help but think that acquiring their church's help in this matter will be...more than a little difficult."

"Ah. Well..."

Only then did Mia realize that in hindsight, she'd actually done quite a lot of things that the priest probably didn't appreciate.

Also, wasn't that fellow a rabid fan of Rafina's? That...doesn't bode well...

She briefly considered bypassing the priest and speaking directly to Rafina before dismissing the thought. Under the current circumstances, such an act could easily be construed by other nobles as begging Rafina for help, which would then make the orphanage's children seem like bargaining chips. The spots saved for them in the academy would be framed as an arrangement forced on the empire by Rafina in exchange for her assistance. It would give those opposed to the academy city project plenty of fodder for political attacks, such as claiming the empire caved to foreign pressure. With her actions having inflamed a sense of competition between Tearmoon and Belluga, the only religious organizations she could appeal to for help were those inside the empire. Rafina was now off-limits.

Ludwig's grimace showed he was also aware of the subtle

dynamics at play. It was the kind of thing that Mia found incredibly exasperating, but complaining about it wasn't going to do her any good. Viscount Berman might have been a somewhat extreme example, but on some level, all nobles were creatures of pride. Having appealed to that pride to loosen their purse strings, she could no longer remove it from the equation. With that said...

Still, this isn't nearly as stressful as staring down Rafina in that election. That *was the stuff of nightmares... I'll just do what I can, and things will probably work out in the end.*

As a seasoned survivor of hopeless situations and certain death, Mia was hardly going to be shaken by such a minor problem. She was so unshaken, in fact, that she proceeded to spend the rest of the day not thinking about it at all! Nor did she devote any brainpower to it during the night. The next morning, having lost no sleep on it whatsoever, she was chewing on her breakfast, eyelids still droopy with slumber, when inspiration suddenly struck.

"That's it! I remember now! That priest who's infatuated with Miss Rafina... There's a thing that he really really wanted! If I get it for him, he'll be so happy that he might just agree to help!"

She wanted to give her past self a medal for remembering the priest's request. Heck, she deserved two medals, because not only had her past self remembered the request, she'd gone above and beyond the call of duty to acquire something extra. Mia, in her opinion at least, was a thoughtful person who looked out for others.

Good job, past me! And good job, present me for remembering what past me did! Ah, I'm so good at this. So this is what it feels like to be an accomplished woman who knows what she's doing.

Having figured out the perfect plan, she rounded up the Princess Guard and headed off toward Anne's home. Along the way, she just so happened to glance up at one of the guards walking beside her.

"Oh my." She recognized the man. "Aren't you...the vice-captain who was with Sir Dion?"

"Hey, so you remember me." The bear-sized guard grinned and scratched his head with a hint of bashfulness. "I'm here because that Ludwig fellow of yours was strengthening the Princess Guard. You remember the guys from our squad back then? Most of 'em got folded into the guard."

"My, is that so? I had no idea."

"Didn't think it'd really happen, to be honest. I mean, a bunch

of thugs like us in the Princess Guard? Thought he was messin' with us, honestly." That was when he leaned toward her and lowered his voice. "I don't blame him for wanting some extra muscle though. Based on what I heard, it seems like you picked a fight with some pretty bad folk. Keep your eyes open, eh? Assassinations can be surprisingly hard to defend against, even for us."

"I see. So that's why..."

"Yeah. So my apologies, Your Highness, but you're gonna have to bear with us big, sweaty men lumbering around you for a while."

"Nonsense. If anything, I should be thanking you for being so diligent, Vice-Captain."

"Hah. Gotta say, that attitude of yours is like a fresh breeze in an outhouse! Feels good to deal with someone so down to earth. Also, I'm no vice-captain anymore, so please call me Vanos, Your Highness."

"Certainly. I leave my safety in your hands then, Vanos."

She performed a cheerful curtsy that earned her another grin. Big men and Mia tended to get along well.

"Ah, Your Highness!"

Upon arriving at Anne's, Mia was greeted by her maid's numerous younger siblings. An army of smiling faces, chest high at best, quickly surrounded her. She looked around at them, their eyes wide with wonder, and waved her hands downward in a pacifying manner. Her mouth said, "There, there. It's just me. Nothing to get so excited about," but her pleased expression suggested she quite enjoyed the attention.

"Ah, Elise," she said, noticing the girl approaching. "It's been so long. I've been reading your stories. They're *ever* so enjoyable."

"He he he, thank you very much, Your Highness." Elise beamed at the compliment. Then, with a sudden intensity to her eyes, she asked, "U-Um, about the wing— Wait, that's supposed to be a secret, isn't it? About, uh...that *special* horse... Is it really true that you can ride it?"

"'That special horse'?" She lifted an eyebrow. "Well... I suppose it's true that I've ridden some pretty special horses before."

Saint-Noel's horsemanship club kept a number of horses. Most of them were large stallions meant for riding into battle, but some were bred for speed, their superior stamina making them better-suited to delivering messages. There were even some smaller breeds

that looked like foals at a glance. They were called ponies, she recalled.

Even I hadn't seen such tiny little horses before, so I guess they are pretty special. Ah, they were so adorable...

While she was reminiscing about when she'd met the ponies, the glimmer in Elise's eyes shifted from curiosity to awe.

"So it really is true... Wow..."

To Mia's surprise, she pressed her hands together and lowered her head.

"Um, Your Highness, I know you're very busy and this is asking a lot, but when you have time, can you tell me some stories about the times when you rode that special horse?"

"Huh. Well, sure, but what is it for?"

"For reference, of course!"

Ah, now that I think about it, she does write a lot of horse-riding princes into her stories... I suppose she wants to know what that's actually like. She nodded to herself, finding the request perfectly sensible. *In that case, just describing what it's like to ride a horse normally probably won't be interesting for her. I should focus on the speed... When you're galloping across a vast grassy plain, and the horse is going so fast you feel like you're flying... Yes, that sense of speed is the best part! Hm... She probably won't mind if I exaggerate things a little. It has more impact that way.*

And so Mia, being a thoughtful person who looks out for others, decided to do Elise's stories a favor and provide her with plenty of high impact but dubiously authentic details about her horse riding.

...Thus, the great work of biographical fiction that was the *Princess Mia Chronicles* took another step toward completion.

After Mia and her guards picked up Bel's group, they all set out together for the Newmoon District. Upon entering, Mia grew a little worried as she watched Bel happily skipping and humming her way down the path.

"Bel, could you come here for a minute?"

"Hm? What is it, Miss Mia?"

Bel skipped over to her with a curious look. Mia lowered her voice to a whisper.

"Actually, we're going to the Newmoon District's church, where we'll be meeting up with Ludwig."

“Really?! I’ll get to see Mr. Ludwig?!”

Bel’s already bright expression somehow brightened even further.

“Yes, but let me warn you not to be careless about what you say. Think before you speak.”

“Careless? What exactly do you mean?”

“For example, don’t say anything about the future.”

That drew a laugh from her.

“Oh, Miss Mia, you don’t have to warn me about that. That goes without saying. I won’t mention anything that might cause problems for you!” she declared with absolute confidence.

Considering her talk with Elise the previous night, said confidence seemed rather misplaced, but such details had long since drifted past the distant horizon of her memory. Like grandmother, like granddaughter. The horizon of Bel’s memory was never more than a stone’s throw away.

“Very well. I approve of your prudence,” said Mia with a haughty nod before looking around at their surroundings and puckering her lips thoughtfully. “I must say, this place is certainly a lot livelier than before. I barely even recognize it.”

The district had certainly improved, but until very recently, it was still just a less filthy version of the same slum it had always been. Now, stores and stalls lined the roads, and there was a bustle she’d never felt before. Many of the products on display were...less than desirable, but the crude air and unregulated nature of the place had a raw charm unlike any other district in the empire, which may have actually contributed to its revitalization.

“Interesting place, eh?” quipped Vanos as they walked. “I heard that Ludwig fellow designated this place as some sort of special jurisdiction. Something ’bout letting people do business here for cheap, so merchants are flocking in.”

The big man wore a wide grin as he explained these recent developments.

“Special...jurisdiction?” Bel perked up at the term. “Oh, does that mean this is where Mia Main Street is?”

“...Mia Main Street?” The eyes of the eponymous princess narrowed. She didn’t like where this was going. Hastily, she whispered into Bel’s ear. “What is that supposed to be?”

“Oh, it was apparently a famous place in the imperial capital. Something like a tourist attraction. I heard a lot of festivals were

hosted there, and they were famous for how everyone would eat Miacakes, which were these sweet pastries made to look like you."

"...Miacakes."

Mia had a brief vision of herself coated in batter while cooking above a flame. She hastily shook the unnerving thought out of her mind.

"There was more cream in the head, so people would argue over the best way to eat it. You had the people who would bite off the head first and the people who would save the head for last. That's what Moth— Uh, Elise told me."

"Bite off the head first..."

Mia had another brief vision of herself without a head, followed by a third vision of herself, this time with nothing remaining but her head.

Maybe it's just me, but this is starting to feel a little too...guillotine-y for my comfort. I'd better tell Ludwig to ban this in advance...

"Ehe he, I only ever got to try it once, but it was really good. It had this unique aroma that went really well with the sweet cream inside."

"I-It's...really good?"

"Yes. It's really really good. Like, *this* good," said Bel, making a big circular motion with her arms.

Mia paused for a moment, lips puckered in contemplation.

Well, on second thought, people did seem to like it a lot. I suppose it'd be somewhat boorish of me to rob the masses of such a popular pleasure. All right, I've decided! This particular affront I shall overlook for now!

It was a display of profound magnanimity that definitely had nothing to do with a desire to try some for herself. Any claims of such nature would be the highest degree of slander.

"So, tell me, Bel. This...'Miacake' thing... When exactly did they come up with it?"

...Again, slander to the greatest degree. You know who you are.

The merry party soon found themselves at the door to the church, where they were supposed to meet up with Ludwig.

"Ludwig did say he'd be a bit late, so maybe we should go speak with the father first..." said Mia before glancing at Bel.

Hm. Like it or not, Bel is going to be seen to be closely involved with the imperial family. She'll need to learn a little about politics. For her

sake... thought Mia.

The sight of her somewhat clueless-looking granddaughter staring wide-eyed at her surroundings made her inner grandmother stir, and she couldn't help but worry for the younger girl.

"Bel, there's something I'd like you to remember."

"Yes? What is it, Grand— Miss Mia?"

Mia ignored the verbal slip. Her increasing competence at performing reflexive mental acrobatics—developed through sheer necessity—made her surprisingly resilient against such faux pas. In this case, her ears heard "grand" and her brain immediately went: *Oh, I* am *pretty grand, I guess. I must project such an aura of dignity and grandeur that she simply had to comment.*

"We are about to ask the father here for a favor," she explained, "and in general, when you're asking someone for a favor, bringing a gift will make things go more smoothly."

Lo and behold, her master plan to win the favor of the priest was...good old bribery. Or gift-giving, as she'd put it. It was one of the oldest tricks in the book, but she spoke with such pretension that you'd think she'd written the book herself.

"Listen up, Bel, and remember this well. There's no such thing as clean politics. The way I see it, if a gift or two can make for smoother negotiations, then by the moons, you should be doling them out like candy."

"Wow! So that's how politics works! I learned something today! Thank you, Miss Mia!" Bel looked up at her with eyes full of awe and admiration. Mia nodded in smug satisfaction.

"So, that thing that soldier is carrying..." said Bel, pointing at a rectangular bundle wrapped in cloth. "Is that the bribe then?"

"Good Lord, Your Highness. It's been so long since you've graced our humble abode."

The priest, having seen them arrive, came out of the church to greet them. He appeared with the same gentle smile as before, and Mia felt a small rush of nostalgia.

"Yes, it really has, hasn't it? This certainly brings back memories."

She performed a curtsy, then introduced Bel to the priest.

"Ah, so she's of Your Highness's blood. Yes, I do see a bit of you in her." He knelt down beside Bel. "Nice to meet you."

"N-Nice to meet you too."

Bel inclined her head, the motion a tad stiff. Then she proceeded to stare silently at the priest for a few seconds before shuffling toward Mia and whispering in her ear, “Um, Miss Mia...”

“Hm? What’s the matter?”

“This man...doesn’t really seem like the kind of person who falls for bribes...”

If anything, the inverse seemed far more likely; trying to bribe the man might instead sour his impression of them. Mia, however, wasn’t bothered in the least. Instead, she smiled boldly in the face of Bel’s ostensibly very legitimate concern, for she knew that though there existed men of principle and moral discipline...

“Oho ho, worry not, Bel. The father is a good man, but he is undoubtedly still a man. And a man’s heart can be moved, so long as you hold the right lure. Also, phrasing. It’s not a bribe. It’s a gift.”

Then, in true villainess fashion, she let out a hushed but undeniably evil laugh—the kind that tended to follow such trite instances of villainous euphemism—before continuing.

“If you take away anything from today, Bel, let it be this. When it comes to these kinds of things, the talk is just for show; by the time we sit down at the table, the result has already been decided. It’s all about who can find out more information about the other beforehand. That’s where the real battle lies.”

She turned to the priest.

“Father, we come today in the hopes that you’ll do us a favor.”

“My goodness, that’s what you’ve come all this way for? Well, do come in then. My office is just inside. Let us discuss it there.”

At his bidding, they followed the priest into the orphanage.

“By the way, is that boy doing well? The boy from the Lulu tribe...” She brushed her hand over her hair where an item twinkled. The motion was, perhaps, not entirely unconscious. “The one who gave me this hairpin.”

A hairpin, faintly iridescent, adorned her hair. The keepsake of the Lulu chieftain’s daughter it was not. That particular hairpin had already been returned to the chieftain. This was actually a new one Mia had recently received as a gift. Apparently, the young Lulu boy had carved it himself, and it was his first time making something like it. By putting it on, she’d score points with not only the boy but likely the priest as well. Conversely, if she didn’t put it on and ended up running into the boy, it would make for a very awkward

conversation. In other words, it wasn't even a choice! Of course she was going to put it on! Mia's fashion sense was just an exercise in risk management!

"He is indeed. In fact, he visited us just the other day. With a whole bundle of fruits he'd picked from the forest..." The priest chuckled fondly. "I'm glad to see that his hairpin is well-received. He'll be overjoyed to hear that Your Highness is still wearing it on her person."

"It's a shame I missed him. I wanted to thank him in person. Do pass on my regards."

"I certainly will."

Just then they stepped through a doorway, and the scene before her caused Mia to freeze in her tracks. They were in a large room, and the rows of desks that lined it were brand new and filled with children. On each occupied desk lay paper and writing utensils. Some remained untouched, their assigned user fidgeting in their seat in boredom. Most of the children, however, were obediently listening to the lecturing nun.

"She's teaching them to write, Your Highness," came the priest's voice from behind.

"My... The Central Orthodox Church is putting a lot of effort into improving literacy."

"We are indeed. By learning to read and write, as well as perform some basic calculations, many avenues of work open up to them. It will also allow them to read the Holy Book themselves."

The Central Orthodox Church had a long history of pushing for universal literacy throughout the continent. At the core of their endeavor was their desire to give every person access to God's teachings, not only through priests but also through their own ability to read the Holy Book.

Hm, it's just as I thought. This priest is also passionate about teaching children. Once he's not scrambling for food and clothing anymore, the first thing he starts spending money on is their education.

Mia glanced from the brand new desks to the fraying seams of the priest's clothing...and grinned.

I think the academy city project just found its newest supporter. As long as my gift wins him over...

Once they entered his office and she lowered her delicate rear onto a chair that definitely could use some extra padding, she clapped her hands together in a feigned display of remembrance.

“Oh, that reminds me! I almost forgot to give you this.”

She produced the gift and placed it before the priest. As the one asking the favor, such acts of goodwill were indispensable. While she could maybe manage without it, a lubricating offering would ensure the gears of their conversation turned even more smoothly.

“I brought you the items you requested last time.”

The priest’s smiling, crescent eyes snapped open at her words.

“Y-You mean... Are those really...?!”

With trembling hands, he parted the cloth and held up the enclosed painting. It was a portrait.

“It’s a portrait of Miss Rafina,” Mia explained. “I had her sign it as you requested.”

“Dear Lord high above, it’s... Words cannot— Thank you, Your Highness. It was only wishful thinking... The fanciful dream of a man who forgot his place, and yet...” he said, voice unsteady with emotion.

Mia, however, wasn’t done. With the knife of bribery planted firmly in the priest’s heart, she proceeded to give it a twist.

“Oho ho, that’s not all, you know? I actually have another.”

“...Another?”

He gave her a puzzled look, to which she responded with a satisfied smile.

“Yes, another. Behold!”

With a literal “ta-daaaa!” she whipped out the item she’d been hiding behind her back and held it out. It was none other than...

“I found it at a vendor in Saint-Noel Academy the other day, so I picked it up and asked Miss Rafina to sign it. What do you think? I figured it must be some sort of rare item.”

She smiled with self-satisfaction, only to receive no reaction. At first, she was taken aback, but on closer inspection, she discovered that the priest was not, in fact, completely still but rather appeared to be having some sort of minor fit. The microscopic tremors gradually grew in amplitude as a low rumbling moan escaped his throat, its trembling pitch increasing in step with the frequency of his shaking.

“Ooooooh... Ooooooooh!” He exclaimed in a Doppler-ing bellow. “That’s... That’s— But...it can’t be! But it is!”

His fingers closed like vises around the second portrait.

“It’s the *Student Council President Election* version! This is a *Super Legend Rare*! I can’t believe you got this! It was limited edition! And

not sold anywhere! Not even in most of Belluga! It was only available in Saint-Noel!"

His protruding eyes almost popped out of their sockets when he discovered the line of words at the bottom of the portrait between his own name and Rafina's signature.

My deepest gratitude to all your hard work. May the grace of God be with you.

He let out a shrill yelp at the message of appreciation, eyes shut, brows furrowed, and lips trembling. It looked like he was about to cry. Which, given the circumstances, was honestly a little scary, and Mia shifted ever so slightly away from him in her seat.

"'S-Super Legend Rare'? R-Really.... Frankly, I'm not too familiar with the details..." she said, struggling to keep herself from grimacing at the priest's, uh...*enthusiasm*. Still, he was clearly delighted by the portraits, and the thought that her plan was working helped her recompose herself.

"A-Anyway. So, the reason I came today is—"

"Ah, yes, of course. I heard from Ludwig already. I told him I'd need some time to work out the details, but I'd be more than happy to give you as much help as I can. You have my word!"

"I... What?"

Mia's mind blanked at the unexpected development. She stared wide-eyed at the priest. Bel stared wide-eyed too, albeit for a different reason.

"W-Wow... So this is the power of bribery..." whispered the younger girl with a gulp of awe, for she had just borne witness to the lubricating power of a well-selected gift—so lubricating, in fact, that it apparently removed the need for conversation altogether and settled the matter before it even began!

C-Could it be that... I didn't even need to bring a brib— I mean gift in the first place?

The whole scheme suddenly seemed a lot less indispensable, but nonetheless, the priest was happy and that was what mattered.

I suppose he does deserve to reap a few rewards from time to time for all that sowing he's done.

She glanced up, willing a silent thanks to Rafina for readily agreeing to sign the things.

"I... I'll put these up in my bedroom!" exclaimed the priest.

"Sure... Feel free to do whatever you want with them..."

“There’s a lot of talk about these in my circles. It’s said that if you place them on the ceiling above your bed, you’ll have lots of good dreams...”

“...Right, I think I’ve heard more than enough. Let’s move on to a different topic before I start losing my respect for you.”

She shook her head, profoundly unimpressed by what she’d just witnessed. Rafina, she decided, would be better served not knowing about how her portraits were being used. Against all odds, in that moment, Mia had become the only sensible one in the room. It was all very strange.

Chapter 6: Manuscript - *The Book of Those Who Slither the Earth*

While Mia was reluctantly indulging the priest's enthusiasm in the Newmoon District...

"Aaah, it's kind of boring when Mia isn't around..." Rafina let out a sigh as she organized the documents on her desk in the student council office.

"It really is... Oh, Miss Rafina, about the budget... I remember Princess Mia saying she wants to increase the amount allotted to the cafeteria," said Chloe as she handed over a piece of parchment inscribed with budgetary details.

"The cafeteria?" Rafina gave her head a curious tilt. "Is there a problem with its services?"

"Oh, about that..." Tiona spoke up. "We looked into it, and there's apparently this academic theory that you have to eat a variety of different foods to stay healthy." She held out a book about nutrition that Chloe had acquired. "We figured Mia probably knew about this. You know how she keeps going on and on about mushrooms? It says in here that mushrooms are actually really good for you. I'll bet she's read this book."

Rafina took the book and thumbed through it with an inquisitive frown. Meanwhile, Tiona continued with a fond smile.

"I was talking to Keithwood once, and he said that sometimes, he thinks Her Highness might actually be a little *too* smart. She just assumes everyone understands her and doesn't bother explaining her reasoning."

"Did he now?" Rafina giggled. "I'm inclined to agree."

She took a moment to retreat into her thoughts, recalling her memories of her dear friend who was now far away at home in Tearmoon.

"Especially during the student council election. A little explanation would have gone a long way, wouldn't it? Instead, she used just about the most roundabout method imaginable to get her

point across." The three girls looked at each other and shared a laugh.

Before their conversation could move on, there was a series of soft knocks on the door.

"Pardon the intrusion, Miss Rafina."

"My, come in. I didn't know you were back."

The door opened, and former Wind Crow agent, Monica Buendia, stepped in.

"I returned not long ago."

"Thank you for the prompt notice. So, how did it go? Did you find it?"

"Yes, I've located the building."

Monica produced a rectangular object wrapped in cloth and placed it on Rafina's desk.

"I see. It's just like Lynsha said then."

"Miss Rafina? What is that?" asked Tiona, puzzled by their exchange.

Rafina gave her a knowing smile.

"This...is the Chaos Serpents' guiding text. Their bible and canon. A copy of *The Book of Those Who Slither the Earth*." She peeled away the cloth to reveal an old book with a rough, black cover. Her expression twisted in disgust. "To my knowledge, this text has almost never appeared on the mainstage of history. Its presence was always behind the scenes. This is my first time seeing it."

She stroked a finger casually across the cover, then instantly jerked her hand back. It was like touching terror itself, and the moment her fingers made contact with it she felt as though snakes were slithering across her hand. An unspeakably awful sensation ran up her arm and into her chest, whereupon it disseminated through her body as a feeling of extreme aversion. A gasp escaped her, causing Monica's brow to furrow.

"What just happened?" asked the former agent.

Rafina didn't answer. For a while, she simply stared at her palm in blank astonishment. Growing more concerned, Monica tried again.

"Miss Rafina? Is something wrong?"

"...No, I'm fine," she finally replied with a pacifying smile before prompting Monica to continue her report. "Anyway, go on. What else did you find out? Oh, did you happen to read the

contents of this book?"

"Yes, I've been authorized to do so, and I've already looked through it."

"I see. And? How was it?"

There was a pause before Monica answered.

"Well, to sum it up...the book describes the process through which a nation is destroyed by revolution."

"Do you mean it predicted the revolution incident in Remno?"

"No, that's not it."

Rafina raised an eyebrow.

"It's not? Then what exactly do you mean?"

"What's written in there isn't prophecy. It's...more like..." She chewed her lips. "Pure malice. If evil could exist as words, this would be it."

Her voice wavered as she spoke that final sentence.

"Pure...malice? That's...quite a vague description, coming from you."

"I'm sorry. I think it's vague too, but..." Monica sighed. Then she continued in an imperfect imitation of a calm voice. "What's written in there...is a manual for how to destroy the system of order we call a nation. It describes ways to corrupt royalty and bring kingdoms to ruin. To beget death with death, and wring from those deaths every last drop of hatred. To then use that hatred to seed the land with violence, creating breeding grounds for revolution and war. And finally, to manipulate the masses so they seek the destruction of monarchies, and with them, the order that governs their lands. I'm only scratching the surface, but that's the sort of knowledge written in this book."

She rubbed her arms, the motion seemingly unconscious. "There's something about it. Something sinister... When I was reading it, it was as if the author's malice was seeping into me through the pages."

Being a trained spy, she was required to maintain constant composure. In that moment, however, her calm front faltered, and it was possible to catch a glimpse of fear on her face. Rafina didn't miss the subtle signs, and she spent a few seconds in silent contemplation before shaking her head.

"Regardless, analyzing the contents of this book might give us some clues about how to track the Chaos Serpents down. Once again, we all have Princess Mia to thank."

Chloe gave her a look of surprise.

"Huh? You mean Princess Mia was the one who found that book?"

"She certainly was. She asked Prince Sion and Prince Abel to spare the life of that man Jem. Then, she sent him to me. I suspect she did so because she expected to get from him, if not this exact book, then something very like it."

"Oh, that makes sense. Princess Mia does seem like the kind of person who'd have thought of that in advance."

"I think so too. I don't know about anyone else, but if I'm right..."

Both Tiona and Chloe expressed agreement at Rafina's inference. Even Monica discovered a newfound sense of awe for the princess.

If she really foresaw all of this... thought the former Wind Crow. *Then this Princess Mia really is a force to be reckoned with.*

Chapter 7: Schadenfreude… Mia Style

After a period of pleasant conversation in the priest's office, Anne entered.

"Excuse me, milady. Ludwig is here."

She showed him in, whereupon he promptly bowed to Mia.

"Forgive my tardiness, Your Highness. I'm terribly sorry to have kept you waiting."

Mia waved away his apology. "It's fine. I know you're a busy man with plenty on his plate. Besides, it's no problem, because I've already settled the matter."

She huffed out a smug breath through her nose. It was the kind of thing that an objective observer would find irritating, but Ludwig responded with only deepened reverence.

"I see. Your Highness has already secured the support we need. Your brilliance never fails to amaze. By the way…who might that be?"

"Ah, this is the girl I told you about in the letter. She's my younger sister from a different mother. Oh, do keep this a secret please. You too, Father."

At her prompting, the priest nodded his promise. With confidentiality established, she relaxed and pushed Bel out in front of her.

"All right, Bel. Go ahead and introduce—"

"Mr. Ludwig, it's really you… My teacher…"

The words escaped Bel before Mia could finish. The younger girl uttered them as though in a trance. In the quiet interior of the office, everyone heard her loud and clear.

"Hm? Teacher? I don't remember teaching you."

Ludwig gave her a dubious look. Mia, meanwhile, was frozen in shock.

…Seriously?! Right off the bat?!

She'd come to expect a certain degree of absentmindedness from her granddaughter, but fumbling so hard on the first thing she said was a new low. Even Bel seemed to realize how big a blunder it

was, and after some frantic stammering said, “N-Never mind! Pretend I didn’t say that!”

With that completely ineffectual statement, she fell silent. Mia resisted the urge to press her face into her palm. The only ones who might be fooled by something like that were Anne’s family. And even then, probably only her youngest siblings.

Well then. Time for some damage control. I’ll have to make up some sort of explanation.

After a burst of high-intensity brain work, she had her excuse.

“Uh… Oh, you see, I actually told her to call you that. I figured there are plenty of things you can teach her, and this might get her into the mindset of learning from you.”

In classic Mia fashion, she resorted to flattery. Everybody loved a good compliment, after all, and men were particularly weak to having their work praised. So she put Anne’s old advice to use and laid on the honey, simultaneously employing the conversational strategy of “Never give up the talking stick.” After all, if nobody could get a word in, nobody could refute her.

“Your knowledge and expertise are very valuable, and I have no doubt they’ll be useful to her in the future, so I instructed her to address you as her teacher. The mindset is important, right? It’s all about habit. If she calls you her teacher, she’ll see you as her teacher, and then you *are* her teacher. In fact, now that we’re on the topic, why don’t you consider teaching a few classes at the academy yourself?”

When she finally finished, there was a brief pause before Ludwig lowered his gaze and shook his head.

“Your Highness’s trust is deeply flattering, but unfortunately, I’m hardly worthy of the title of teacher.” He turned to Bel. “Miss Bel, I am but Ludwig. Nothing more, nothing less. Please refer to me as so.”

“My, how terribly modest of you. I, for one, think very highly of your abilities.”

Considering she relied on him for pretty much every step of every significant undertaking, “think very highly of” was a vast understatement, and she said it with the air of a patron who was feeling particularly generous with her compliments that day, whereas the actual dynamic between them was probably closer to a complete and one-sided dependency. Nevertheless, no one was in a position to point out the discrepancy.

“I, of course, appreciate the positive appraisal, but whenever I think of my own master... When I compare myself to him, I cannot help but feel myself lacking in every respect. To teach is to be master to another, and the title ill suits my middling talent,” he said with a wry shrug. “Granted, this is but a personal fixation, but I suspect that if Your Highness met my master in person, you would share my opinion.”

“Would I now... Hm? Does that mean...”

“Yes. I have located him,” he declared, expression brightening in a rare display of genuine glee.

“My! That was quick. Good job.”

“Thank you very much. In fact, when I requested for Your Highness’s return, I also asked a fellow student who studied under my master for help determining his whereabouts. He’s found him much earlier than I’d anticipated.”

“A fellow disciple? How nice of him to do that for us. You should introduce him to me sometime.”

Mia’s mood grew increasingly exuberant. Things were proceeding so smoothly that it seemed like all her problems were going to solve themselves. She already had Princess Arshia from Perujin. Now she also had lecturers being sent by the Church, along with Ludwig’s master and all the people who’d flock to him and his reputation...

“Well then. I think this problem is as good as solved,” said an exceedingly optimistic Mia.

Meanwhile, Ludwig’s expression darkened.

“Not exactly. If anything, now comes the hardest part.”

“Hm? What do you mean? All you have to do is talk to that master of yours and ask him to help us out, right?”

Ludwig shook his head before speaking with a reluctant grimace.

“It’s...not that simple. My master is... Well, he’s not exactly fond of nobles. Loathes them, in fact. It’s not going to be easy to get him on board with Your Highness’s academy city project.”

“Oh, I see.”

Mia nodded. That explained why he wasn’t under the influence of the Greenmoons. If he fundamentally despised nobles, it didn’t matter how hard they’d tried to sway him; he wouldn’t have had any of it.

“He’s very stubborn about it too. Convincing him to change his

mind…" Ludwig winced at the thought, "is definitely going to be an uphill battle."

"Wow. That does sound like a real headache," replied Mia in that tone one took when feigning empathy for another's troubles. And the empathy was definitely feigned, considering…

Oh, Ludwig, Ludwig, Ludwig…how the tables have turned on you and your four eyes. After all that scolding you did in the previous timeline, it's time for me to watch as you grovel before your master. Considering he traumatized you so much you can't even bring yourself to use the same title as him, this is going to be one heck of a show. My, what a terribly satisfying experience this will be!

She beamed at him, relishing the schadenfreude. Unfortunately for her, she had no way of knowing what happened to the last fellow who'd laughed at Ludwig's misery. The man was still suffering the consequences to this day. Indeed, what goes around comes around, and in Mia's case, karma decided to upgrade her to next-second delivery for free.

"My condolences, Your Highness, but seeing as it is an impossible feat for me, I must nevertheless burden you with the task."

"…Huh?"

"It is, after all, why I requested your return in the first place. Please, Your Highness. With all your sage wisdom, please convince my master to join our cause."

"…*What*?"

She stared at him, mouth agape.

"C-Convince your master? Who? Me?"

"Yes."

Their eyes met. There was no humor in his.

He's…not really the type to joke about this kind of thing, so… Wait, does that mean… He's serious?

Her brain struggled to process this sudden development.

"U-Uh, Ludwig, could you maybe tell me a little more about your master?"

She decided to try and buy herself some more time to wrap her head around what had just happened.

"Of course. Let me see…" He nodded assent and crossed his arms. "My master is…a stern individual. I've heard that there have been aspiring students who went to him, only to have their wills shattered and to be sent home in despondency after a single day. I

myself have been subject to his scolding and afterward found it difficult to stomach even a light meal for days."

...You have got to be kidding me.

A good three-quarters of her motivation evaporated at his first sentence, never mind the rest of the description.

"He is well-versed in all forms of knowledge, which is both a prerequisite and a product of his quest to elucidate the laws and mechanisms that govern our world. Should he wish to learn the art of war, he would go to former battlegrounds and run around with a spear in hand. Should he wish to study the mind of man, he would visit markets and taverns and mingle indiscriminately with the people there. In his desire to know the effects of poisons, he's taken diluted doses himself, and once collapsed from doing so. Which did not stop him. He is a free spirit, traveling from one place of interest to the next, whereupon he distills all that he sees, hears, and feels into new knowledge that he then makes his own. Many in our circles refer to him as the Wandering Wiseman."

The guy's a straight up nutjob! Sweet moons, how am I supposed to convince someone like that? This is not going to work!

A further three-quarters of her motivation melted away. Frankly, he sounded like a complete weirdo, and she wanted absolutely nothing to do with him. Even so, she managed to say with a strained smile, "Ah. I, uh...see. He certainly sounds...like a very smart individual."

"Indeed. In terms of sheer volume of knowledge, I doubt there is anyone in the empire who can surpass him. Furthermore, he is also a superb educator, and I still remember how he nurtured us, at times harshly, at times gently, but always with the goal of teaching us more."

Sometimes harsh, sometimes gentle, huh. I see, I see, thought Mia as she digested his words. *So he's got a whole carrot-and-stick thing going. When he gets tired of using the stick, he starts hitting you with the carrot. Keeps switching it up so the suffering stays fresh.*

She considered this uniquely sadistic method of torture, imagining its metaphorical beatings of both organic and inorganic means, and shuddered in horror; it seemed like the kind of thing to leave a permanent traumatic mark. It goes without saying, of course, that at this point, not a shred of Mia's motivation remained. In fact, she'd lost more motivation than she'd had at the outset. She was in motivation debt! Seeing as going to speak with Ludwig's

master was now literally the last thing she wanted to do, she voiced her dissent—diplomatically worded, of course.

"C-Correct me if I'm wrong, but wouldn't it be, um, problematic to have such an eccentric individual as headmaster?" she asked, shooting Ludwig a glance that said *Think of the children!*

A lesson with the man sounded pretty traumatizing, and she figured there were plenty of kids who'd share her opinion. It seemed a better idea to find someone else, and she conveyed her concern through her expression. Ludwig, having ostensibly comprehended her silent message, gave her a placating smile.

"Your Highness's concern is certainly understandable. However, rest assured that the academy will be in good hands. My master is frequently stern, but never without good reason. For example, when his pupils don't make an effort to think or ask a question that, with some deliberation, they could have answered themselves, his admonishment is swift and merciless."

Ah. That sounds exactly like the kind of person I'd imagine to be Ludwig's master. Realizing that he wasn't going to change his mind, she regarded him with a despairing expression. *Maybe you're different, you stupid four-eyes, but for some people, it doesn't matter how good a motivation you have. When you say mean things to them, they get hurt.*

And having it shoved in your face when you already knew you were wrong was even worse.

"Don't worry, Your Highness," said Ludwig, noticing her increasingly grim expression. "With your gifts, I'm sure you'll have no trouble keeping up with him. Rather, he might be the only person in this world who can hold a conversation with Your Highness on even footing. I suspect you'll find him to be someone you can truly connect with on an intellectual level."

I do not *need to connect with a wackjob like him! It's hard enough to deal with someone with* your *smarts, and now you want me to talk to someone even smarter? No way! I won't have any idea what he's talking about. And then there's all this talk about him being stern and scary... Ugh, he sounds downright awful! I want nothing to do with him!*

Mia was having second thoughts about this idea. And third thoughts. And fourth. After all, even if she somehow successfully persuaded the man, the story didn't end there. He'd become headmaster of her academy, which meant she'd have to deal with him on a constant basis ad infinitum. Ludwig was bad enough, and

this man was apparently more Ludwig than Ludwig. It honestly sounded like some sort of nightmare scenario dreamt up by a particularly torturous writer.

"Oh, but didn't you say he hated nobles? Doesn't that rule me out as a good candidate?"

"No. My master hates arrogant nobles who lack courtesy, as well as pigheaded nobles who make no attempt to step beyond the bounds of established norms and beliefs. Your Highness is neither of these."

"I-Is that so? I don't know. I, uh, can be pretty hardheaded too, sometimes. See?"

She gave her head a few knocks to prove her point.

"Ha ha, I'm sure you can," he replied with amused irony, having taken it as a joke.

Bel and the priest clearly thought the same, and they joined him in his laughter. Even Anne smiled at her, humor seeping into her gentle eyes. An air of mirth descended upon the room, and for a moment, everybody shared in its warmness.

Everybody except one, that is.

Wh-What in the moons is so funny?! Stop laughing! Do you people enjoy seeing me suffer?!

Mia's state of mind was something more akin to desperation, and it took an enormous effort of will to stop herself from screaming her frustration at the roomful of people who apparently found her plight endlessly amusing. Her desperation soon turned to despair as she sensed the unmistakable air of finality in the room. The discussion was done. Like it or not, she was going to meet the man.

I see... I won't be talking myself out of this one anymore... My fate is sealed, she thought, feeling like a lamb who'd just clued in to her impending slaughter.

Faced with this terrible truth, Mia chose...acceptance. Why spend the energy resisting if it was inevitable? So, she resigned herself to her fate—specifically, she resigned her body to her chair, sinking into it like a deflating balloon. Just then, a cup of tea appeared before her.

"Miss Mia, try some of this black tea. It's sweet and smells lovely."

"Ah... Okay..." She complied with the request and took a sip. "Mm... You're right. It's very good."

The tea flowed through her mouth, leaving behind a lingering sweetness...as well as a touch of saltiness for some reason.

"I'm glad you like it. I'll excuse myself then."

That was when her dazed brain finally registered the voice that had spoken to her. It was a youthful voice, and it belonged to none of the people in the room.

Wait a minute! Who just handed me this tea?!

Her face shot up and she scanned the room before whirling toward the door, where she discovered a young girl who was about to leave. The girl looked a few years younger than her and was probably one of the orphans who lived here. In her, Mia saw a thin ray of hope.

"Hold on! You— Yes, you at the door. Could you come here for a minute?"

"Um, me?"

Mia put on a disarming smile as the girl approached her.

The orphanage in the Newmoon District taught its children how to read and write, as well as basic arithmetics. All orphanages of the Central Orthodox Church followed the same basic curriculum, and the quality of the education they provided was at least conscientious, if not outstanding. It was, all in all, an honest endeavor from the Church to prepare the children as well as they could so that when they left their orphanage, they could survive on their own. Despite their best efforts, however, not every child who stepped out into the world found happiness. The young girl Selia, who was taken in by a merchant family upon aging out, was one such example.

Selia was the best student at her orphanage. A proactive learner, she always took her studies seriously. So diligent were her studying habits that everyone in her orphanage agreed that if she ever went to an advanced school, she would surely become a great scholar. Sadly, their prediction never came to pass. In the merchant family that took her in, there was no happiness to be found. Of course, having food to eat, clothes to wear, and a roof over her head were no small fortunes. For an orphan who grew up in the slums, those might very well represent the greatest luxuries she could aspire to. Greed, after all, knew no limits, but desire had to be tempered by reality.

“What more do I want? I should be satisfied. At least I can live like a person instead of a dog...”

Time and again, she whispered those words to herself. Time and again, they fell over her heart, an ashen layer growing ever thicker that eventually obscured her feelings from her own mind. She stopped thinking about it.

She gave up.

So, she lived the life she’d been given, her budding intelligence trampled by her own pacifying words. Their seeds would find no fertile soil, and the wisdom contained within—a wisdom that, had it been given the water of opportunity, might have sprouted into countless wonders—was doomed to rot in obscurity.

The years wore on, and one day, an aged Selia lying ill in bed—the spark of her intelligence long since doused by a lifetime’s worth of storm and stress—looked back on the road she’d taken. There was regret; there was no doubt of that. But what she felt even more deeply was a withered resignation.

“What choice did I have? I’m an orphan. Orphans...should be thankful to be dying in a bed.”

Soon after, she closed her eyes, and the last sliver of her wilted life wasted away.

...That was the dream Selia woke from. The pallid light of dawn reflected off the pale walls of the orphanage, making her room look all the bleaker. She curled up in her bed, feeling the weight of despair pressing down on her heart. All her hard work and effort...none of it would matter in the end. She didn’t want to believe it. The studying... The diligence... The nightly struggle to stay awake and read just one more page... It was all an attempt to fight back. To prove her own suspicions wrong. But the more she tried, the more her path narrowed...and the more she despaired at the dead end that was rapidly coming into view.

Then, *she* appeared. The Princess of Tearmoon and shining symbol of the empire’s glory, Mia Luna Tearmoon—benefactress of not only the orphanage but the whole Newmoon District—came to visit. A nun told Selia to bring the princess some tea, so she did, paying the utmost attention to ensure she carried out the task without the slightest blunder. Afterward, when she was about to leave the room, she was suddenly spoken to—by the princess herself, no less.

“Hold on! You— Yes, you at the door. Could you come here for a minute?”

“Um, me? D-Did I do something wrong?”

“Hm? Oh, no. I was thinking it’d be useful to hear the opinion of someone on the receiving end of such things.”

The princess’s eyes lingered on her for a second, as if in silent and urgent appeal, before reverting to a smiling gaze.

“Tell me something. When you’re learning, you’d prefer to be taught by a nice, friendly teacher, right?”

“...What do you mean?”

“You’re the girl who was doing all that writing practice in class earlier, right? I saw how focused you were. That kind of studying takes a lot of effort, and I was wondering where you find the motivation. I assume it’s because the nun doing the teaching is a nice lady, so you’re happy to listen to what she says, right? Now imagine, if you will, a different nun teaching you...but she’s really strict. Whenever you make a mistake, she’ll make sure you know. She’s not unfair about it, since you did actually make the mistake, but she has *no mercy* and will drive the point home by telling you just how wrong you were. With a teacher like that, you won’t be nearly as motivated to learn, right?” said Mia in the kind of tone usually reserved for spooky campfire stories.

“Let’s say you’re allowed to go to a school for free, but the teachers there are really really strict. Would you go? And keep studying, no matter how hard it is and how much you’re scolded? Wouldn’t there be a day when you decide you’ve had enough and just run away?”

“...I don’t care.”

Selia was surprised to hear her own voice—doubly so by the edge it contained.

“I don’t care how hard it is. Or how much they scold me. As long as they’ll teach me... As long as there’s hope...I don’t care about fairness or mercy. I want to learn. To know there’s hope. Even the faintest ray. As long as I can still see it, I’ll keep going.”

In her mind, Selia looked up at the great obstacle looming over her. It was no mountain; it was a wall. Just a wall—simple, immaculate, and entirely unmoving. There were no handholds, no cracks for her to grip. Unscalable and unbreakable. Like cruelty incarnate, it existed solely to stand in her way as a cold, emotionless, and insurmountable barrier. Were it a mountain, she

could climb it. Steep as it might be, there was still hope of reaching its peak. A wall, not so. Faced with its relentless vertical smoothness, she could but sit and sob in its shadow.

To her, the answer to Mia's question was self-evident. No matter how precipitous the climb, so long as it was a mountain... She might stumble. She might be injured. She might even die falling off a cliff. But she would do so with hope. The peak would always be there, and reaching it would always be possible. That knowledge alone was enough to keep her going.

She met Mia's gaze, then looked down at the ground and clenched her fists.

"If I'm allowed to go to school, I'll stay there, no matter how hard it is. Being put in an environment where you can learn and choosing not to do so... I think that's inexcusable."

Only after the reverberations of her voice faded did it fully dawn on her that what she just said amounted to lecturing the Princess of Tearmoon. The color drained from her face, and she rushed to apologize, only to have her words lodge in her throat when she looked up to see the tears welling up in Mia's eyes.

"Then I expect you...to do exactly as you said."

"Huh?"

"I swear upon my name, girl, that if I successfully bring in a really really strict headmaster, then I'm enrolling you in my school. And I'm going to have you study directly under that headmaster."

"Huh? Wai— What?"

"You said you wanted to learn," Mia said in a trembling voice as she placed a hand on the young girl's shoulder and squeezed hard. "Then take responsibility for those words."

For a long time, Selia could do nothing but stare, mouth agape and mind blank at the path that had suddenly opened up before her.

Ludwig, who'd been observing this exchange nearby, heard the emotion in Mia's voice and found himself moved by her response.

I see that Her Highness will always be Her Highness... She is a woman of compassion. That never changes.

The orphan girl's plight must have resonated with her. He watched as she turned to him and declared, "And you're going to help, Ludwig. If we're doing this, then we're doing this together, so you're coming with me!"

To him, her command sounded more like a commitment to harden her own resolve. Knowing the harsh rigor with which their potential headmaster would operate, she must have felt hesitant to subject children to such a demanding education. However, the determination displayed by their first orphan student must have pushed her to match the girl's grit.

"Of course, Your Highness. I will do everything in my power to help."

A renewed sense of purpose and fulfillment washed over him, reminding him again how fortunate he was to be serving under Mia.

Now, for anyone else watching these events unfold, it should be plainly obvious that Mia was not, in fact, moved by Selia's display of resolve. Rather, she really didn't want to see Ludwig's master and had made a last-ditch effort to claw her way out of this arrangement. Seeing Selia appear, she pounced on the opportunity she presented in the hopes that the opinion of a potential student would turn the tide in her favor.

For Mia, it was common sense that studying was, in general, not an activity to be engaged in proactively. As princess, she had an obligation to endure some amount of schooling, but she certainly wasn't going to go out of her way to seek it, especially if it came with promises of stern, lecture-happy teachers. If she *had* to learn, she'd much prefer her education be delivered in a gentle, leisurely fashion. Consequently...

If I tell this girl what the school's going to be like, she'll probably hate the thought of going. Commoners don't need much education anyway. As long as they can read and write and do basic math, they'll get by fine. Who in their right mind would want *to get scolded everyday just so they can suffer even more by studying all sorts of hard topics? And once Ludwig hears how reluctant she is to go, he'll give up on the idea of persuading his master!*

Mia asked Selia for her opinion, figuring she'd offer a firm rebuke of austere education, only to have the plan blow up spectacularly in her face.

Ah, I see what this is... This is fate conspiring to send me off to Ludwig's nasty master so I can be thoroughly eviscerated, and all I can do is accept my doom.

She spun toward the orphan, tears of grief welling in her eyes, and fixed her with a bitter glare.

"Then I expect you...to do exactly as you said."

Before the dumbfounded girl could react, she grabbed her shoulder and squeezed, refusing to allow her the slightest chance of escape.

You think you can just throw me to the wolves and run away? Think again! I've got you now! You like it when they're mean to you? Well, have fun, because you're getting exactly what you asked for!

She peeled her lips back in a malicious grin.

"I swear upon my name, girl, that if I successfully bring in a really really strict headmaster, then I'm enrolling you in my school. And I'm going to have you study directly under that headmaster."

You're going to take responsibility for what you said! I can't be the only one who gets shortchanged! If I have to suffer, then you're all suffering with me!

Driven by a desire to see misery dispensed equally, she resolved to take everyone else down with her. Thus, as a result of Mia's commitment to the spirit of sharing, Selia's life took a dramatic turn. Half a year later, she would step through the doors of the newly-built Saint Mia Academy as one of its first students.

It bears mentioning that what Mia did that day would later serve as the basis for the formation of a special class consisting of students handpicked by the orphanage to receive direct tutelage from the headmaster. If Ludwig and his fellow disciples were the first generation to be taught by the Wandering Wiseman, then the children of that class would be the second, and they differed from their seniors in one crucial way—they felt a deep-seated gratitude toward the princess for rescuing them from poverty, which eventually hardened into unwavering loyalty for her cause.

Favored by Mia's compassion, they would later mature into a cohort of talented officials who took up posts throughout the various ministries. There they would put to full use their considerable intellects—honed to a razor's edge by their master—toward realizing the reformation (as articulated by Ludwig) that Empress Mia strove for. Among this group of capable graduates destined to become pillars of the future empire, Selia was undoubtedly the leader. As one of Chancellor Ludwig's most trusted subordinates, she spearheaded a great many projects, earning herself titles such as "Lady Wonder" and "The Ace-of-All-Trades."

These, however, were only visions of an unrealized future.

Whether they become history or fiction...would be decided by none other than Mia, whose shoulders bore the weight of countless dreams yet to be dreamt.

"Uuuugh... H-How come...it has to be me..."

They were an unsteady pair of shoulders, moving in concert with the sniffling complaints of the oblivious princess they belonged to.

Chapter 8: Bel's Wasteful Spending

"All right. Goodbye, Miss Mia. Be careful on your journey."

Ludwig's master had apparently taken up residence in the Sealence Forest with the goal of learning more about the empire's minority tribes by living among them. It was decided that Anne and Ludwig would accompany Mia on her quest to meet the man.

"I don't think I'd be very useful even if I went, so I'll stay here in the capital," continued Miabel.

It was effectively a request to separate from the group. There was something she wanted to do in the capital, no matter the cost.

"Are you sure you'll be okay?"

Mia was worried at first, but she let the younger girl have her way in the end. Thus, after saying goodbye, Bel went out into the streets of Lunatear with only Lynsha in tow.

"What are your plans for today, milady?"

"Oh, nothing much. I just want to take a quick stroll around the capital and see the sights." She inclined her head toward Lynsha. "I'm sorry, Miss Lynsha, but I'll have to ask you to do a lot of walking today."

"Uh, sure. I mean, that's not really something you have to apologize for..."

Lynsha scratched her head awkwardly. Having spent so much time around the likes of her brother, she'd become a bit of a cynic in her attitude toward others. As a result, Bel's guileless attitude would always throw her for a loop; she couldn't quite figure out how to deal with her frank innocence.

That goes for Princess Mia too, honestly... I wish she'd just act like a proper princess, spoiled arrogance and all. It'd make things so much more straightforward...

She sighed.

"So? Where are we headed?"

"Well, I'd appreciate it if we could head toward the Newmoon District..."

"Huh? Isn't that...the place they used to call the slums? Are you

sure it's safe there?"

Bel giggled.

"You're such a worrywart, Miss Lynsha. The Newmoon District isn't a dangerous place, because it's home to a lot of kind people who look up to Grand— Miss Mia."

And with that, Bel gleefully hopped off, leaving a thoroughly confused Lynsha to follow in her eager footsteps.

As soon as they arrived in the Newmoon District, Bel began to behave in a manner that could only be described with the term “indiscriminate rubbernecking.” She stared at everything with a great deal of fascination, it was almost as if she was trying to remember something. Or, perhaps, reliving a vision of things that weren’t there, but had been. So absorbed was she in her mysterious objectives that Lynsha couldn’t bring herself to disturb her. Instead, she simply trailed behind in silence. Eventually, Bel spoke.

“Ah... That’s it. That’s the store...” she whispered before dashing off.

“Hey, wai— Milady!”

Lynsha rushed to follow and watched as the girl disappeared into the doorway of a dingy-looking shop. Upon entering, she found Bel talking to the shopkeeper.

“Um, Mister... Could I have one of those?” she said, pointing toward one of the pastries on display.

“Sure thing, young lady. That’ll be five crescent coppers,” the man answered with a broad grin.

Bel stuck out her hands toward Lynsha.

“Miss Lynsha, may I have my allowance?”

She let out a helpless sigh before handing over the coin purse. “All right, here you go.”

The next thing she knew, Bel had pulled out a lustrous coin and pressed it into the man’s hand without a second thought. Its silver glow and semicircular marking signaled its value—a half silver, the second-most valuable silver currency.

“Please keep the change. Thank you very much.”

“You’re wel— What?!”

The man’s grin froze. By the time his shock managed to manifest on his face, Bel was already gone.

“Wait! Milady! What do you think you’re doing?”

Lynsha dashed after her in a panic. The pastry she’d bought was five crescent coppers. Paying with a half silver meant she was owed a whole crescent silver in change. A crescent silver was a lot of money; it wasn’t the kind of thing you just gave as a tip. Only after they’d run far beyond the range within which the shopkeeper could reasonably track them down did Bel come to a stop, allowing Lynsha to catch up. She immediately grabbed her charge by the arm

with a sort of nervous energy and allowed her heart a few seconds to slow before scowling.

"Milady Bel, I don't know where you got the idea for that stunt, but never do it again. It's not good to show off by wasting money like that."

It was the kind of stereotypically pretentious act that appealed to nobles who possessed greatly inflated opinions of themselves, and Lynsha—for perfectly good reason—was not about to let such behavior go unreprimanded. While it was true that Bel had been given an allowance that she was free to use, it wasn't meant to be spent wastefully; the money was for incidentals.

"If you keep wasting money like that, you're going to get a good scolding from Princess Mia," warned Lynsha.

To her surprise, Bel didn't back down.

"No, I'm not wasting money."

There was no doubt in the young girl's voice. No defiance. Only certainty. Sheer will, bright and piercing, radiated from her eyes.

Lynsha flinched, her hand inadvertently releasing Bel's arm. Every so often, Bel would exude an aura that made Lynsha's breath catch in her throat. There was something about her expression and the way she carried herself that befit the word...majestic. Looking at her was like laying eyes upon a queen.

It's so easy to forget sometimes...but this girl's related to Princess Mia. That makes her royalty. A member of the imperial family of this massive Empire of Tearmoon.

The thought made her stiffen a little. She straightened her back. Bel, however, simply smiled, the expression innocent.

"If I owe someone a favor, then I must make sure to pay them back properly. That's what I was told by Grand— Miss Mia. That's why...I'm sure she won't mind."

Lynsha had no idea what that meant. One thing was clear though. Whatever it was that Bel was doing, she wasn't wasting money frivolously.

"I...don't really understand, but I'll trust you. You're sure this is fine?"

"Yes. It's something I have to do. So I'd really appreciate it if you'd just let me."

Again, Bel smiled her angelic smile, and again, Lynsha could do naught but sigh.

“Miss Miabel, come have a bite of this.”

Every time she passed in front of the dingy shop, a friendly voice would call out to her.

“Miss Miabel, this way. You can hide with us for a while.”

Every time she passed in front of the small house, visions of the people who’d tried to help her would resurface.

The battle that rent the empire in two left the capital in ruins, but even in the hellish remains of the once-proud city, there were pockets of kindness. Hunted by the Empress Prelate and her Holy Aquarian Army, Bel lived a life on the run. Time and again, she encountered people who would shelter her and help her escape. People who loved and protected her, even at the cost of their own lives.

Bel remembered them. All of them. Every face, every voice, tucked away deep within her for safekeeping…so that one day, she might have the chance to repay their selfless generosity.

“Gratitude should be acted upon. If you owe someone a favor, you must never forget it…and always try to pay them back…”

With the teachings long ago bestowed on her by her esteemed grandmother held close to her heart, Bel continued to dash through the streets of the Newmoon District.

Chapter 9: There's Nothing Wrong With Running Away, Is There?

With a loud creak, the carriage Mia rode in began trundling its way down the road. The horses pulling it did so at a languid pace, almost as if they had caught the mood of their passenger.

Aaaaah... I don't want to do this. I really really don't want to do this.

She let out a deep sigh, attracting a worried glance from Anne. Ludwig had departed early to make the necessary preparations for her arrival, while Bel and Lynsha were off doing their own thing. As a result, she and Anne were alone in the narrow confines of a carriage that seemed to grow narrower with every sigh.

How come it has to be me? The guy is Ludwig's master. He should be doing the convincing. Ugh, maybe everything will have already worked out by the time I get there...

It should be abundantly clear by now that Mia would prefer to take the easy way out whenever possible. The way she saw it, it'd be best if a moon fairy would show up when she was sleeping and just magic away her problems for her. Failing that, a close second would be if Ludwig showed up as soon as she got there and told her he'd already settled the matter. Equally clear should be the fact that nothing of the sort was going to happen.

"Ugh..."

She let out a miserable groan for...the somethingth time; she'd lost count. Anne gave her a look of concern.

"Milady? Are you all right?"

"Hm? What do you mean?"

"Well... It's just that...you seem a little down."

"I'm fine. There's nothing to worry about."

Mia smiled.

But a second later, she sighed again. The sight seemed to trigger something in Anne and, with the look of someone who'd made up her mind, she stepped out and climbed toward the driver's box.

Soon after, she returned and posed an abrupt question.

"Um, milady...since we're on the road, would you like to do some horse riding?"

"...Huh? Horse riding?" said Mia, blinking in bafflement.

Anne nodded vigorously.

"Yes. I know that you enjoy going on long rides, and I just checked with Vanos. He said that the road here is in pretty good condition, so it should be pleasant on horseback."

"Hmm... Well, I suppose it'll make for a nice change of pace. Oh, but what about you, Anne? Last I checked, you weren't exactly good with horses."

For some reason, that caused Anne to start fidgeting.

"Uh... Actually..." she eventually said in a sheepish voice, "I wanted to learn to ride too, so I've been working on that in my spare time."

"My! Really? You're learning to ride? That's certainly news to me. Whatever gave you the idea though?"

When asked about her motive, Anne regained some of her confidence.

"It's because I don't want to be a liability for you anymore."

"Oh, Anne." Mia placed a hand gently on her shoulder. "I've never thought of you as a liability."

"You didn't take me with you to Remno. You were placing yourself in the most dangerous position, and I couldn't be there for you...all because I couldn't ride."

There was audible frustration in her voice.

"Anne..."

"But now, I'm learning. This way, I'll be able to follow you whenever and wherever you go." She placed a hand over her heart and smiled. "So please, don't keep everything bottled up. I believe in you, milady. I know that whatever the problem is, you'll find a way to solve it. But if it really gets to that point and there's nothing left to be done, just remember that no matter how hard the problem is, there's always another option. You don't have to go down with the ship. You can always just run away. And if you do, I'll be there with you, every step of the way, until the end of my days."

She conveyed with many words what was fundamentally a very simple message: "Don't stress too much. Cheer up. I'm here for you." It came from a place of genuine concern. Being overstressed can lead to uncharacteristic failure, and she didn't want that to

happen to her friend.

"Ah... Anne..." Mia was deeply moved by this sentiment. "Yes... Yes, you're right."

Of course. I can always just run away. When you're up against an opponent you can't beat, what's wrong with running away? Sweet moons, what was I thinking? I was so focused on actually figuring out how to persuade that weirdo that I lost sight of the bigger picture. If I'm gone, then Ludwig and his people will just have to deal with this problem instead, and they'll probably solve it for me. That's right! Why am I so worried? I've got nothing to worry about. If it doesn't work out, then I can just run away.

Mia was, in fact, moved so far that she ended up on the opposite side entirely. Humans were, at the end of the day, creatures of interpretation. They heard only what they wanted to hear and saw only what they wanted to see. Mia was no different. Granted, running away was going to be easier said than done, but the possibility of escape had a restorative effect on her mood, and she stepped out of the carriage with much lighter steps than she'd gotten in. Immediately, she was greeted by two dismounted guards with their horses in tow.

"These horses are ready to be ridden at your leisure, Your Highness."

"My, how obliging. Thank you. In that case, I do believe I'll take them for a spin."

She mounted one of the horses with an enthusiastic hop. Glancing sideways, she was pleased to find that Anne had managed the same.

"Oho ho, not bad, Anne. Well then. Shall we go?"

They tapped their horses into a walk.

Now that I think about it, I haven't been riding in quite a while.

Memories of her first attempts came back to her. She remembered how back then, the distance from the ground and the rocking of their gait were sources of terror. Now, she felt a comfortable familiarity in their swaying steps. Her ego swelled a little at the thought that she was the more experienced of the pair, and she stole a smug glance at her fellow rider. Anne, however, had apparently put in no small amount of work and was managing the feat with far more adeptness than she'd expected.

"Wow, not bad at all, Anne," said Mia, feeling impressed by her maid. Suddenly, she felt a surge of excitement at the sight of Anne's

steady horseback form. “In that case, I think we can make this a little more interesting. Hmm... Oh, I know! How about we race to the bottom of that hill?”

Anne barely had time to nod before Mia kicked her horse into a gallop.

“Let’s go, Silver Moon!”

“That’s not the horse’s name, Your Highness,” quipped a nearby guard, but neither horse nor rider seemed to mind.

Mia leaned forward, feeling the wind in her hair, as Silver Moon (*Real name undetermined) sped down the trail.

“Oho ho, this feels so good! Come on! Faster! Faster!”

The horse obeyed, and the rhythm of its pounding hooves accelerated. It burst onto an expanse of grassy plains, strong steps kicking up a small storm of green and brown. It was as if she’d become one with the wind, the mounds and pits of the uneven ground melting away into a smooth dash that felt like flight.

Exhilarating! Absolutely exhilarating! It’s like I’m riding on a winged horse! What an experience! Moons, when I get back, I need to tell Elise about this!

As she reveled in the liberating moment, she heard someone call out to her from behind. Their voice was filled with a puzzling urgency.

“Your Highness! Stop! You’re going too fast!”

“Eh?”

Reality came rushing back to her, and she suddenly realized the surrounding scenery was flying by at alarming speed.

“Oh my, I lost myself in the moment there... Oho ho, how silly of me. Let’s see, in order to stop the horse, I have to...”

Trying hard to remain calm, she spoke the necessary steps out loud to herself. Then, in accordance to her own instruction, she tightened her grip on the reins...and pulled! Alas, her attempt to remain calm wasn’t all too successful, and her inherent nervousness manifested in an undue amount of force. The horse did not appreciate the sudden yank on its reins, and it reared violently.

“Wha—”

And with that graceless utterance, she once again became one with the wind. The difference was that this time, her horse wasn’t with her. Instead, its retreating form was a dire reminder that she’d been thrown from its back—at breakneck speed, no less.

She felt a nauseating weightlessness.

U-Uh oh. Am I…in trouble?

"Milady!"

Some part of her mind dimly registered Anne's shriek of distress, but it was too late. Her fall was inevitable. Except it wasn't the ground that received her. Rather, something thick and rigid caught her around the middle.

"Blech!"

A second utterance, even less graceful than the first, escaped her lips. She swallowed hard and just barely managed to prevent a live demonstration of projectile vomit. She forced her eyes—which had had every intention of rolling back in their sockets—to take in their surroundings.

"Phew. Gotcha. Right in the nick of time."

Vanos's face swam into view. Alarm was still evident in his smile. It was then Mia realized that the thick, rigid object was his arm, and she was being held under his shoulder like a bundle of straw.

"That was a close one, Your Highness. Good thing I caught you. Are you hurt anywhere?"

He plopped her down in front of him on his horse. She didn't resist, straddling the steed limply and allowing herself some time to recollect her wits. When her heart finally stopped pounding in her chest, she turned around to address him.

"Thank you, Vanos. I'm terribly sorry to have put you through that. I got a little carried away there."

"You sure did. Gave me one hell of a scare. If anything happened to you, Captain Dion'd be mighty displeased. And I think that Ludwig fellow of yours wouldn't be all too impressed either. Not to mention your poor maid…"

She glanced back to discover Anne, her face deathly pale, trying desperately to control her horse as she urged it toward them.

"Yes, that must have been such a terrible scare for her…" Mia said with regret. Had she actually fallen and hurt herself, Anne probably would have fainted on the spot. "I need to be more careful."

"Gotta say, that wasn't what I was expecting to hear from you," said Vanos.

"Hm? What do you mean?"

"Well, I figured I'd get an earful about our insolence or gall or whatnot."

“My, whyever would I do that? It hardly seems a fitting thing to say to someone who just saved me.”

“Huh. Frankly, I couldn’t agree more. It’s just that experience tells me a whole lot of nobles out there think otherwise.” He chuckled wryly.

“That aside, Vanos, now that I’ve got a closer look at you... I must say, you really are big, aren’t you?”

“Big? Hah! That I am! And proudly so! One of the biggest in the empire, I’m pretty sure. There’s more to me than just my size though. I’m no Captain Dion, but I’ll have you know that I’ve got a pretty good sword arm too.” He laughed, his voice as booming as its owner was large. “The empire’s got soldiers who’re bigger, and soldiers who’re stronger, but I doubt you’ll find any who’re both bigger and stronger. Point is, a guy like me can be pretty useful. Makes for a great meat shield, at least.”

“My, that’s very reassuring to know. But meat shield? I must say, I do not approve of you debasing yourself like that. I’ll remind you that you are now a member of the Princess Guard, so you should carry yourself with the confidence and pride that befits a knight who protects me from harm,” she said with a chiding tone before concluding with a smile.

Vanos grinned, this time ear to ear.

“Hah! You’re a real likeable one, Your Highness. Gotta say, it feels good to serve under you. Makes the whole job worth it.”

They glanced at each other and shared a laugh, this time without the inhibitions of rank and station. She tended to get along well with big men, you see. It was just a Mia thing.

“Milady! Are you okay?!”

Finally, Anne caught up with them, her face a mask of terror. Mia proceeded to spend a good few minutes apologizing profusely to her distressed maid.

Chapter 10: Stop the Construction of the Gigantic Golden Mia Statue!

The morning after arriving in Viscount Berman's domain, Mia was briefed on the construction progress of her academy. Since they were already there, Ludwig also decided to add an on-site inspection to her schedule.

Whatever. After all, if things get out of hand, I can always just run away.

The reassuring fallback of Anne's suggestion allowed her to escape her downward spiral of lethargy and maintain something of her usual level of outward enthusiasm as she performed her duties. First on her docket of official business for the day was to greet Viscount Berman in his manor and formally express her appreciation for his efforts, after which she listened to an explanation of how they planned to build Princess Town.

"Currently, we are prioritizing the construction of the academy, in accordance with Your Highness's wish to begin classes as soon as possible. I hope this arrangement is appropriate?"

"Yes, quite so."

She observed the Viscount, noticing that he seemed to have lost that servile smile he always wore when she'd last seen him. Instead, he wore an expression of quiet confidence—unassertive, but also unwavering. It was the kind of air often exuded by those who felt pride in what they were doing. Beside him stood an official from the Scarlet Moon Ministry, whose lustrous blond hair, smartly trimmed beard, and affable smile radiated the kind of elegance unique to those of genteel upbringing. He appeared to be around Ludwig's age.

I wonder who that is? A noble from somewhere, maybe?

After carefully studying the man, she gave him a smile. It didn't cost her anything, and it was a great way to avoid making enemies. She'd give out smiles all day if they could keep her adversaries away. The official looked taken aback by this gesture but quickly

steadied and followed up Berman's explanation with his own.

"Specifically, the main school building and student dormitories will be the first to go up. With the cooperation of the neighboring Lulu Tribe, they will be constructed using trees from the Sealence Forest. I heard that Your Highness is rather fond of the wood produced there..."

He glanced at Mia's hair, which was still decorated with the pin she'd received from the young Lulu boy.

"That sounds like a wonderful idea. I'm sure the buildings will turn out beautifully."

Once shaved and polished, wood from the Sealence Forest acquired an iridescent shine. A campus of faintly glowing buildings sounded like quite the enchanting sight, and Mia nodded in satisfaction at the thought. In general, she wasn't particularly fascinated by lavishly financed architecture, but pretty things were pretty, so she wasn't going to complain either.

Viscount Berman wasn't done though.

"Also, Your Highness, if you could take a look at this..."

He produced a few pages of parchment.

"Oh? What might these be?"

She reached forward to take them, but in the process, she noticed that Berman's self-satisfied smile was not shared by the man behind him. The ministry official regarded the parchment with what could only be described as profound disgust.

...Am I sure I want to see what's on this?

The circumstances left her with little choice, and she reluctantly accepted the documents. It took only one look for her fears to be realized.

"What... What *is* this?"

"Why, it's a statue, Your Highness! A big golden statue of yourself!"

"A...big golden statue...of myself?" she said, so stunned she could barely get the words out.

The sentence felt like a bomb going off in her head. It left her in a state of shell shock.

"Indeed! I'm planning to have it stand as tall as the spire of the Whitemoon Palace!"

Just thinking about how much that would cost made her feel ill. Berman, clearly oblivious to her growing nausea, continued his spiel.

"And I'm going to have them hollow it out so it can be entered."

"E-Entered? You mean...you can go inside?"

She quickly leafed through the pages to discover one with a detailed blueprint of the gigantic statue's interior.

"As you can see," said Berman, referring to the schematics, "it will be possible to view the outside scenery from the eyes and mouth."

"Ah. I see. How...fascinating."

"I'm also thinking of illuminating them, so at night, you'll see beams of light shooting out from the openings. Implementing this feature, however, will require a tad more money than we currently have available, so I was hoping to request—"

"Request denied," she said in a flat, weary tone.

Ludwig's going to bite my head off if I authorize this kind of wasteful spending...and even if he doesn't, I'm not sure this idea sits right with me to begin with. It's so...gaudy, and in all the worst ways...

She tried to imagine the scene of its completion—a gigantic golden likeness of herself towering over its neighboring structures, eyes and mouth emitting beams of light into the night sky—and got goosebumps.

I remember thinking the same thing during the whole hairpin affair last time, but this Berman fellow has really bad taste.

"D-Denied? But why? Think about it, Your Highness! If this is built, it will become one of the empire's most glorious landmarks."

"Why?"

She inwardly rolled her eyes and blew out an exasperated sigh.

Are you seriously asking me why this is a bad idea?

Trying to explain her reasoning felt like more trouble than it was worth. It might, she thought, be easier to just order him to abandon the idea. This possibility was then promptly quashed by his next statement.

"If funding is a concern for Your Highness, then I'm more than willing to personally bring the matter up with His Imperial Majesty and negotiate further support."

"...You will do no such thing."

Mia shot down this idea as well.

If Father gets word of this, I know for sure he'll jump on board without a second thought and impose some sort of special tax! Imagine how angry people are going to be when they're told they'll be paying

more taxes so a big golden statue of me can be built. And they'll probably blame me*, to boot!*

The problem was that knowing Berman, even if she told him to knock it off, there was a very good chance he'd still go appeal to the emperor directly. That meant somehow, she had to convince him to drop the issue right here, right now. Engaging all the thinking faculties of her already aching head, she initiated her persuasion campaign.

"Viscount Berman, you are misunderstanding my intention."

"...Misunderstanding? I'm sorry, Your Highness, but I must ask you to enlighten me."

"You spoke of glory, but *whose* glory did you mean? For you see, what I consider to be my glory are the students who will attend my school, as well as their numerous future achievements after stepping out into the world! Therefore, if you have money to be building a golden statue, I'd much rather you spend it on the students themselves," she declared.

I mean, the only achievement I really care about is Cyril Rudolvon's new strain of wheat, but whatever, she added in silent soliloquy.

"On the students? But... I'm afraid I don't—"

"Think about it. Even if you built the statue, its glory would only be witnessed by those who come here. However, if the school's students head out there and do great things, news of their accomplishments will quickly spread. They'll be hailed as geniuses throughout the continent. They'll gain fame. Then, when people learn that they were schooled in the empire's first academy city, that fame will extend to the school itself. And where is it located? Why, in the domain of Viscount Berman, of course. Your name will be inextricably linked with the academy and the glory it commands. Now doesn't that sound simply wonderful?"

A voice murmured in response, but it wasn't Berman's.

"In other words... Man is a castle, and man is its walls... Well said."

She looked in the direction of the speaker to find the ministry official regarding her with interest.

"Hm? I'm sorry, what do you mean by that?"

"Oh?" The official's eyes widened slightly at her question. "Your Highness is unfamiliar with the saying? It's a quote from a famous king in the East. What he meant is that no matter how magnificent a castle you build, it means nothing without people.

Treasure your people, and at times, they can be as sturdy as a castle and protect you with the resilience of its walls."

Mia was about to claim she knew about the quote but changed her mind at the last second. It was a reflexive act initiated by her olfactory instincts, who had sensed the distinct smell of danger in the air.

Pretending to know things in front of smart people is a dangerous thing to do, and I'm getting a serious Ludwig vibe from this guy. He reeks of smartness. In this case, it's probably best to...

"Wow, I had no idea. You're very knowledgeable."

"Thank you, Your Highness, but it would appear that I am not the one who is knowledgeable in this regard..." said the official with a respectful bow of his head.

His pensive expression piqued Mia's curiosity, but Berman interjected before she could say anything.

"I see, I see. The intellectual breadth of Your Highness never fails to impress. Your scholarly words are a blessing upon us all."

Unlike the official, Mia wasn't shy about receiving praise. Feeling rather satisfied with herself, she decided the official's strange expression couldn't be all that important and decided not to inquire further.

In the end, she managed to dissuade the Viscount from proceeding with his gigantic golden statue project. Instead, under his orders, a different sculpture was erected at the site of the academy a few days later. The Lulu Tribe, having accepted a formal request from Berman, sent a team of their finest artisans to handle the actual construction. The final product was of modest size but impeccable quality. Crafted from the wood of the Sealence Forest, it showed a scene of Mia frolicking with a unicorn.

Later, a certain court author with an overactive imagination would lay eyes on the sculpture and, inflamed by a sudden surge of fantastical inspiration, push the Princess Mia Chronicles ever further into the realm of complete fiction.

Not that it really matters. Anyway...

Chapter 11: The Proverbial Three Visits

A man stepped into the Sealence Forest. His lustrous blond hair carried a hint of red, and his brown eyes glittered with intelligence. He was the Scarlet Moon Ministry official working under Viscount Berman to oversee the construction of Princess Town, and his name...was Balthazar Brandt.

Born the third son of a Count, he and Ludwig shared a long history as friends and fellow disciples. He walked down the narrow trail, navigating its twists and turns with the deftness of familiarity. Lately, he'd been making frequent trips here to discuss matters surrounding the town's construction, and his legs already knew the path better than his head, which freed his mind to sink deep into thought.

He reached the Lulu village, but this time, he didn't stop. Instead, he headed deeper into the forest. Eventually he came to a small tent. Consisting of a thick, stiff cloth hung over a simple frame, it was a shelter constructed using the method traditionally employed by the Lulu. Standing in front of the tent was a familiar figure, whom Balthazar greeted with a relaxed, "Well, if it isn't Ludwig. Shouldn't you be serving your princess? What're you doing wandering around in the woods?"

Ludwig turned toward him and shrugged.

"There's not much I can do now, it's down to her."

"Huh. That's not what I expected to hear from our friendly neighborhood princess fanatic. I thought you'd be buzzing around her every chance you got. Didn't you swear your eternal loyalty to her or something?"

"I was being considerate. It's your first experience, after all, and I didn't want to get in your way." Ludwig smiled with teeth. "So, what did you think? *Enrapturing*, wasn't she?"

Balthazar scrunched up his face into a scowl of reluctant agreement.

"Okay, fine. You were right. I'm pretty damn impressed. The princess actually managed to talk Berman out of building that ridiculous golden statue."

"*That's* what you're impressed by?" Ludwig rolled his eyes. "Please, Balthazar. You know how much that project would have cost. *Of course* she'd stop it. That was never even in contention."

Balthazar stared at his old friend, who spoke as if it were a self-evident truth of the cosmos. After a brief silence, he shook his head.

"No, Ludwig. It *was* in contention. At least, it was to any objective observer. Throughout history, there's been no shortage of rulers with a fondness for large statues. An inflated sense of self-worth leading to expensive acts of exhibitionism is a common quality among corrupt rulers, and plenty of nations have had their coffers emptied by the unquenchable egos of their sovereigns."

"Hm, you raise a fair point... It seems that being in the service of Her Highness has distorted my perspective somewhat. I'm starting to hold everything up to the standard of the Great Sage of the Empire," Ludwig admitted.

There had been a king who'd erected bronze statues of himself throughout his kingdom and commanded that they be regularly worshiped. There'd been an emperor who'd feverishly insisted his statue be the biggest in the world... Such stories were in good company. The desire to be worshiped or deified was a powerful, almost irresistible one for many a ruler.

"At such a young age...and when blessed with such beauty... For her to be so immune to the influence of pride and ego... Well, let's just say I get why you're so infatuated with her now." He crossed his arms and nodded thoughtfully. Then, he raised an eyebrow. "On that note, what *are* you doing here?"

"I'm here to see my— our master. We're trying to set up a meeting between him and Her Highness, and I figured I'd do some of the legwork in advance..." Ludwig grimaced at the tent. "Haven't managed to get a word in yet though. He's *thinking*."

"Ah, figures. The good old 'Do Not Disturb' mode. Glad to see that part of him hasn't changed." Balthazar let out a sympathetic sigh. "Our master's a tricky old badger, isn't he?"

"He sure is."

They shrugged helplessly at each other and laughed.

"Hm-hm, some nerve you've got, laughing in front of your master's..."

The sound of a third voice made both of them jump. They hastily shuffled a few steps apart and stood to attention, their gazes focused on the figure of an old man who appeared from the tent. He had a prominent gray beard, and it shook a little as he turned his head toward Ludwig.

"I swear, you buggers always show up at the darndest of times," he said, his roguish grin expressing less annoyance than his words would otherwise suggest. "Can't a man have some time to think these days without someone barging in on his tent?"

"I'm glad to see you're doing well, Master."

He bowed deeply. The old man matched his gesture.

"And I, you. Much time has passed since we last traded words, hasn't it, my dear student?" He stroked his thick beard. "So, what brings you here today? I'm pretty sure I already told you I've got nothing more to teach."

"You have indeed, which is why I've come today not for my own learning, Master, but to seek your help."

"Hm-hm, my help, you say? Frankly, I don't think this old bag of bones has much left to offer."

"There is much you can yet offer, Master. Please, give me a moment to explain. The fate of the empire rests on this matter."

The serious tone of Ludwig's voice failed to move the old man, who dismissed the plea with an annoyed shake of his head.

"I've still got ears, Ludwig, and they've been hearing things. Things like how you're apparently serving under the Tearmoon Princess now. Does this involve her?"

"Yes, I serve Her Highness Mia Luna Tearmoon, and this does indeed involve her."

"The Great Sage of the Empire, huh. I've heard enough of her to last me three lifetimes. Can't say I'm thrilled about the idea, honestly... You know me. I've got a thing against nobles."

"I do know, Master. I make this request not in neglect of your aversion to nobles but in spite of it."

"You'd go that far, huh? What is it about her, Ludwig? What makes you think it's worth all this effort just to get me to talk to her?"

"Forgive me if I sound overly dramatic, Master, but she is the one to whom I've sworn my lifelong loyalty. She commands my complete devotion."

The old man narrowed his eyes.

"'Complete devotion'? *You?* So, I am to believe that she prevailed upon someone of your caliber. That certainly makes things more interesting... Balthazar, are you of the same opinion?"

Balthazar responded with a firm nod.

"Man is a castle, and man is its walls..."

"Oh? She knows about that proverb? Rather well-read for someone her age," he said, nodding thoughtfully to himself.

Balthazar, however, shook his head.

"No, she didn't. Not the proverb. But she spoke the wisdom contained within. It was not allusion...but conclusion. A facet of fundamental truth discovered through pure reasoning. It was...impressive, to say the least. I am therefore of the same opinion. She does indeed deserve the title of Great Sage."

A vision of Mia reappeared in his mind, and a tingling sensation —not unlike a mild shock—ran over his skin. He'd heard from Ludwig. Heard all about her. But still, it wasn't the same. The sheer impact of *experiencing* her firsthand was incomparable.

"Master, please see the princess. Speak with her. Look her over in person, and judge her with your own eyes and mind. And if you find something of value in her, then lend her your strength."

"Hmmm... All right, you win. I guess I just can't refuse a request from my dear students. Honestly, you two are lucky I'm such a kind and accommodating person."

Neither discipline remembered any remarkable displays of kindness or accommodation from their master, but both were prudent enough to refrain from commenting.

"The thing is..." continued the old man. "It's not that I don't trust the two of you, but I'd prefer to test her myself. How about...that ancient piece of folklore from the east? The three visits? Yes, I think that'll do just fine...."

Ludwig regarded the wily grin on his master's face, feeling a worried grimace forming on his own.

The day after she was briefed on the academy's construction roadmap at Viscount Berman's residence, Mia arrived on-site to inspect the progress. The inspection itself was little more than a formality, really just a quick tour of the area. What came after was the real business of the day. It was finally time for her to meet face-to-face with Ludwig's master, the Wandering Wiseman.

"Your Highness... It's about time."

At Ludwig's cue, she gave her cheeks an invigorating smack and breathed out.

"All right. Let's do this."

With a look of grim determination, she stepped into the Sealence Forest.

Her view on the matter had changed a little over the past day. After a sweet welcome—for her tongue, anyway—at the Berman manor, she gathered enough of her wits to reconsider her position. Running away, she'd decided, wasn't actually a feasible option. This understanding had come with the realization that Anne had meant her words to be taken as emotional support rather than a literal escape plan.

This...is not a situation I can afford to run away from.

In general, Mia tried her best to live up to the expectations of her loyal subjects. They believed in her, so she felt an obligation to reciprocate. Though it might come as a surprise, somewhere in her was a heart of genuine, twenty-four-karat gold. It just took a lot of digging to hit the vein.

Besides, Ludwig's counting on me. And the only reason he'd count on me is if he couldn't do it himself...

Okay, maybe eighteen-karat.

If I stroll in and manage to convince his master in one try... I can just picture the look on his face. I bet his eyes will pop out of their sockets. Oh, it's going to feel so *good!*

Nope, never mind. It was gold plated at best. Regardless, she'd switched from the "hightail it out of there" camp to the "stay and tough it out" camp. Mia, you see, had a flexible mindset. It was one of her strong points.

Now, the task at hand was figuring out how she was going to acquire the help of the famed Wandering Wiseman. She'd spent the whole of last night pondering it. She'd pondered and pondered...and

then she'd woken to the morning sun. Without any good ideas, of course, though that hardly needed to be said. At least she wasn't suffering from any sleep deprivation.

"Well, I'll just have to try everything that comes to mind and see what works!"

Thus began Mia's preemptive maneuvering.

"By the way, Ludwig, wouldn't meeting your master in my current attire be disrespectful?"

She was currently dressed in outdoor clothes. A heavy, long-sleeved top coupled with a sturdy skirt worn over thick tights. Not an inch of skin was showing from her neck down to her ankles. Ludwig's master purportedly resided deep in the forest—deeper than even the Lulu village—and the heavy-duty getup was to protect her delicate skin from being scratched by branches and underbrush.

"I assume he values decorum. Perhaps it'd be best if I changed into a dress..."

"No, my master is averse to excessive ornamentation. He's of the opinion that one should always dress pragmatically. When in a forest, wear forest clothes, so to speak. In this case, showing up in a dress might actually worsen his impression."

"Huh. Is that so?" said Mia with a tinge of disappointment.

How unfortunate. With such unfashionable clothes, it's going to be difficult to put my enchanting good looks to use. Such a shame...

We all know what you're thinking, folks, but remember. Silence is golden. Be golden.

"Oh, how about bringing him a gift then? What kind of things does your master like?"

In a flash of inspiration, she decided to try repeating her success with the priest in the Newmoon District.

"Things he likes, you say... Hm, I'm not quite sure. He's far from a gourmet, so foods are not— Oh, but I do remember that he once said wild hare caught in the forest made for an excellent stew."

"Ah, I've had some of that before as well. Interesting. I see that he knows his delicacies."

Her taste buds recalled the exquisite pot of hare stew she'd had when she was in Remno, and she covertly wiped her mouth. The thought had awakened the unquenchable passions of her inner

epicure.

Granted, there's no guarantee we'll be lucky enough to catch one of those delicious hares on the way there. The bribery card is going to be hard to play too... A shame again.

As they walked and talked, the forest grew darker and denser.

"Since we've come all this way, we should probably say hi to the Lulu before we leave."

"Indeed. I've been intending to arrange a meeting with them."

"You have? Excellent."

"Yes. They are, after all, helping to build the academy."

The path they were following narrowed into a winding trail through the ever-thickening vegetation.

"Gotta say though, I'm still glad we didn't end up fighting any of them here," Vanos commented. He looked around and rubbed his arms as if he felt a sudden chill. "Can't thank you enough for that, Your Highness."

Visibility was terrible, and the terrain heavily favored local inhabitants. He didn't even want to imagine the consequences of fighting a battle in such a hostile environment. Just then, the encroaching darkness gave way all at once to a clearing. In the middle sat a small tent.

"We're here. That is my master's temporary abode."

"Oh? Fascinating..." Mia regarded the little tent with curiosity. "Hm... With one of those, I could set up camp anywhere, in case I ever need to make a quick getaway... I should ask him how to make one for myself later."

She continued to contemplate the utility of small tents for a while, murmuring indistinctly to herself, until finally taking a deep breath, steeling herself, and taking a few steps forward.

"Excuse me. Is the Wandering Wiseman home?"

She waited a few seconds. There was no answer.

"...Huh."

She lifted an eyebrow.

Maybe he didn't hear me? He's called a wiseman, so he's probably pretty old. Maybe his ears don't work too well.

A repeated attempt, however, was met with the same silence.

"Is he...not home? Just to confirm, Ludwig, you *did* tell your master I'd be coming today, right?"

"Of course." After a period of contemplation, Ludwig continued. "However...there are times when my master becomes absorbed in

his thoughts. In this state, he would ignore all communication from the outside. To my knowledge, the longest he's been in one of these meditative states is five days straight, during which he never once stepped out of his room."

"What?!" The cry was of outrage, and it came from Anne. "How *dare* he! That's so incredibly rude to milady!"

It was a rare display of anger from her, and she was in good company; the guards with them were glaring at the tent with equal displeasure.

Before they could act on their indignation, Mia held up a hand.

"It's no matter. We're the ones who've come to ask a favor, after all, and he probably has his fair share of things to deal with."

"B-But, milady..."

"Since he doesn't seem to be home, why don't we wait here for a while," said Mia in a soft voice.

Her expression was perfectly placid. No... *Almost* perfectly placid, because the corners of her lips showed the slightest hint of...a smile!

This is my chance!

Having spent most of the trip there pondering how to wrangle an "okay" out of Ludwig's master, her thoughts had grown increasingly litigious, and now, Mia the polemic saw an excellent opportunity to go on the offensive. Agreeing to meet someone and then being absent when they show up was a major faux pas. If he was ignoring her, then all the more so. Clearly, the other party was at fault.

I have plenty of fodder now! If he says something mean to me, I'll just hit him back with this! In which case, the more I have, the better...

"Then... Let's find you somewhere to sit, milady."

"No, that will not be necessary. I shall wait for him right where I stand."

If the man popped up and caught her during an unflattering moment—when she was yawning or scratching an itch, for example—she'd be handing some of that fodder back to him. No, what the situation called for was absolute adherence to propriety. She was going to be a paragon of decorum. That way, when the gloves came off, she'd be faultless and impervious to criticism. And then she was going to *thrash* him for being late to this meeting.

That means I shouldn't talk too much either. What I need to do right now...is to keep quiet and look pretty.

Fortunately, her experience as a dungeon detainee armed her with the skills necessary to kill time. Back then, she'd passed days on end just by counting the number of stones in the dungeon.

Compared to that, this is a cinch. There are so *many things to count. Let's see... Why don't I start with blades of grass... One grass, two grass, three grass...*

Standing expressionless and completely still, Mia began to count the number of blades of grass in their vicinity. It was a little creepy, honestly, and the kind of thing that, had people known what she was doing, would have caused them to back slowly away from her. A little after hitting thirty thousand...

Hm, I think that'll do for now.

She nodded with satisfaction and addressed her company.

"It seems like we're out of luck today. A little disappointing, yes, but we'll head back and try again on a later—"

That was when her mind lit up with the most devious of inspirations.

Yes, that's it! Oho ho, I just figured out how to put him in an even worse position!

She thought of Ludwig's earlier anecdote.

Ludwig was talking about how this guy holed himself up for five days straight and ignored everybody else. If one no-show is a strike against him, then imagine the leverage I'll have with five! *I just have to keep coming here for the next few days...*

Missing someone once was undoubtedly rude but still arguably within the realm of forgivable affronts. Twice though? Or even...thrice? In a row? That was unforgivable. And in a duel of decorum, that would be a checkmate. It'd throw his "I hate nobles because they're presumptuous pigs" argument straight out the window. After all, one couldn't claim to hate presumptuous people while acting in a presumptuous manner. Such hypocrisy would only make a fool of the speaker. It'd weaken his position so much that he wouldn't even be able to talk back, much less say mean things to her.

If I can gain that much leverage over him, he'll have no choice but to accept our request! Moons, what a marvelous idea this is!

She trembled at her own brilliance. Then she began subtly maneuvering to set her marvelous idea into motion.

"Ludwig, could you arrange for someone to make a trip to the Lulu village?"

“Hm? Certainly. But… What for?”

Ludwig frowned in puzzlement at her request.

“I was thinking… If I don’t get the chance to meet your master today, then it might be best to seek lodging with the Lulu. Better than going all the way back to the Viscount, right?”

Returning to the Berman manor would inevitably result in her being tied up by something or other, making it difficult to come here on a daily basis. Staying at the Lulu village would cause no such limitation. Ultimately, her goal was to present to Ludwig’s master the fait accompli of having tried to meet him multiple times to no avail. That way, when she eventually found the man, she could say to his face, “While you were busy being stuck in your thought coma, I wasted many days of my life trying to meet you.” Five times might be a stretch, but ideally she’d get two more unsuccessful attempts in. At the very least she needed to fail once more tomorrow.

“B-But… Isn’t the forest rather, uh… Lacking in various comforts?”

“Is it, really? I certainly don’t mind. Back in Remno, I spent a night in the open with a campfire, you know?”

She giggled as though she found his question comedically ludicrous, which only deepened Ludwig’s bewilderment.

And so, unbeknownst to everyone else, Mia’s ploy to bring down the bastion that was the Wandering Wiseman was quietly set into motion.

Chapter 12: Princess Mia, Charmer of Young Boys

Upon arriving at the Lulu village, Mia received an enthusiastic welcome. After receiving preemptive notice from Ludwig about her impending visit, the chieftain had arranged for a reception feast of sorts to be held in the village square. The men went out to hunt and came back with a gigantic fullmoon boar, which was roasted whole to serve as the feast's main dish. In the middle of the square was a massive bonfire, encircled by a crowd so large it had to represent the entirety of the village. The sheer scale of this gesture left Mia genuinely astonished.

"This is such an incredible welcome, and on such short notice too..."

"The whole village was thrilled to hear that Your Highness would be visiting. I told them a modest reception would be more than sufficient, but..." explained Ludwig with a helpless shake of his head. He'd come early to help with the preparations. "I suppose the regard in which they hold you is simply too high to comply with such a request."

The tone of his statement was joking, but its content rang true. The Lulu had always valued the principle of reciprocity. Mia, as benefactor of the chieftain's grandson and arguably savior of their entire tribe, would inevitably enjoy their unqualified gratitude. Whether she'd be appreciated was never in doubt. It was the *degree* of appreciation that took both her and Ludwig by surprise.

The Mia fever was not limited to the village; it had also overtaken tribespeople like Liora who'd journeyed out of the village in search of work. In other words, she'd effectively acquired a fanbase of highly skilled archers whose members dotted the whole of the empire. So formidable was the combined prowess of this latent quasi-militia that were she to make an actual attempt to flee, she'd probably do so quite easily with their help alone.

Mia was oblivious to this fact and unlikely to grow any more

enlightened, considering all her attention was currently focused on the rotund form over the fire that was in the process of completing its transformation from swine to supper, one sizzle at a time.

"Was that boar caught in this forest?"

"Yes... It was... Your Highness! I went with them... And watched them hunt it!" explained the enthusiastic young boy to her side. He was the chieftain's grandson, whom she'd previously rescued in the Newmoon District.

"Did you now? My, how brave of you... Oh, that reminds me." She hammered one hand with the other and turned to face the boy. "I don't believe we were ever formally introduced. Let's do that now." She performed an exemplary curtsy for him. "My name is Mia Luna Tearmoon, Princess of the Tearmoon Empire. What's your name?"

The boy stared at her for a few seconds, mesmerized. Then his face reddened, and he quickly dropped to his knees.

"I'm Wagul. Thank you very much... For saving me that time... I'll never forget it, Your Highness."

He looked back up at her, his eyes brimming with the beauty of innocence. She couldn't help but tease him a little.

"My, never is a long time, you know? Are you sure you can remember for that long?"

"I, uh..."

"Oh, but I suppose that's nothing to worry about. After all, the wonderful gift I received is proof of your thanks, and that won't fade any time soon."

Her ensuing smile turned his face a few shades redder. Mia, as it turns out, was quite the boy-killer, so to speak.

"Greetings, Your Highness... It is my pleasure... To have you here."

The chieftain approached her and inclined his head.

"The pleasure is mutual, Chieftain. I see that you're getting along quite well with Wagul."

He scratched his head sheepishly and grinned.

"Thanks to Your Highness..."

"Hardly, but I'm glad for you nonetheless. Also, I can't help but notice that you've become more fluent in the imperial tongue," she said with a curious gaze at the chieftain, who scratched his head again.

"The Wandering Wiseman gave lessons... And I practiced a little

myself... It is also easier... To talk to Wagul in the... Imperial language."

"Oh? You've met the Wandering Wiseman?"

"He comes to the village often... Has Your Highness not spoken to him yet?"

"No. We tried to meet with him, but apparently he was caught up in some sort of thought marathon and never got back to us," she said in a conversational tone as her hands busied themselves with the meatier task of delivering a fine cut of roasted boar goodness into her waiting mouth.

She enveloped the sizable piece with the whole of her cheeks and chewed on it. Each time she bit down, savory juices spilled out of its tender tissue, coating her tongue in rich flavor.

Aaaaah, this is so exquisitely good! Moons, am I glad Ludwig's master never showed up. I'd have missed this... And he was nice enough to give me plenty of fodder to attack him with. Honestly, all that talk about him is really starting to seem overblown. I think he might turn out to be a pushover.

The comforting thought manifested itself as a pleased smile, which was juxtaposed against a rather furious Wagul. The young boy at her side was practically shaking with anger.

"Ignoring Your Highness? That's... Unforgivable!"

"My, Wagul, are you getting mad on my behalf? I certainly appreciate the sentiment, but it's quite fine. I'm not bothered at all. In fact, I believe it all turned out for the best."

"Huh? Why?"

"Well..." She gave the boy a wink and a grin. "If he showed up, I wouldn't have been able to come to the Lulu village and enjoy your delightful presence now, would I?"

Then she gently lifted her hand and brought it to his face. He froze, tracking her motion only with his eyes, whereupon she picked a speck of meat off his cheek. Said cheek, along with its partner, reddened immediately, and he looked down, unable to meet her eyes.

Mia, Charmer of Young Boys, strikes again!

"Ludwig," she said, turning toward her loyal subject, "it would be remiss of me not to thank you as well. Your preparatory efforts here were nothing short of excellent."

"I'm honored, Your Highness, but more importantly, allow me to apologize on my master's behalf. I'm terribly sorry that you have

had to make an unscheduled overnight stop outside the manor."

She chuckled at his penitent attitude.

"Please, this is hardly worth an apology. I'm more than capable of handling a setback or two. It's all a necessary part of the process, right? If we want to get a word in with the man, then we'll just have to play this game."

"Play this game, you say..." echoed Ludwig, his brows rising in surprise. "I see. So you've already realized."

"Of course I have."

So he understands what we're doing too. Good. This is going to be a game of leverage, and we're stocking up for the big showdown.

She huffed a pugnacious breath out her nose before tossing another piece of juicy meat into her mouth.

I can't wait for him to ignore me again tomorrow! Come on, wiseman. Just keep handing me that fodder!

After the feast's conclusion, Mia spent the night in the village. She and Anne shared a cabin with an elderly woman. Though frugal in furnishing, its cleanliness made for a comfortable stay. Mia, by the way, was the type to sleep perfectly well without a bed—another skill she'd picked up during her dungeon days. Back then, her amenities consisted of a filthy blanket and a cold, stone floor. Sleep had eluded her at first—lying down on her granitic bed proved rather painful—but the adrenaline of discomfort could only last so long; a fortnight later, exhaustion served as her mattress. Compared to that...

"Mmm... Not bad at all."

Waking comfortably to the chirping of birds in the morning, she gave her bedding a few investigative pats.

"I wonder what's in these. Feels like some sort of...down? It's soft to the touch, rolls easily, and is wonderfully warm to wrap yourself in. Everything about it is excellent. I've never paid much attention to my bedding before, but... Hm, now that I think about it, I do spend a good chunk of my life in bed, so it might be wise to be a little more choosy..." she muttered, sounding like some sort of drunk mattress merchant who'd mistaken herself as her own client.

Her blanket-enveloped body felt a little sweaty, and there was a lingering smell of smoke on her, probably from the bonfire last night. She frowned and got up.

"I could really use a bath right now..."

Just as she began discussing with Anne about how she longed for a big tub of water, her prayers were answered by their host. Having walked in on this mild grievance, the elderly lady arranged for the women of the village to take her to a nearby river where she could bathe. After cleansing herself, they even provided her with a change of clothes, and Mia returned in a brisk mood, refreshed in both body and soul.

"Lulu fashion isn't half bad either. These clothes of theirs are quite nice," she said, examining the fluffy attire she had put on.

It was made from some sort of animal hide covered in a thick layer of fur. It was pleasant to the touch. She ran her hands over it and giggled in glee.

"I'm really going to blend in with the locals now, aren't I?"

The chieftain approached her and inclined his head respectfully.

"Your Highness is... Always welcome in our village... Come by whenever you would like... We would be... More than happy to accommodate you again."

"My, do you mean it? I wouldn't want to impose."

"We love to see you back here... My grandson, especially..."

"Is that so? Well, in that case, could I ask your permission to stay here until I manage to meet the Wandering Wiseman?"

"Permission? Your Highness, please... You are our savior... Treat this village as your own." The chieftain then paused, as if an idea had just come to him. "That reminds me... Are there any foods... Your Highness wishes to try? If so... We will do what we can... To find them..."

"Foods, you say? Sweets, I suppose, though I had plenty of fruits yesterday already... Maybe honey or something? Hm... Oh, I know!" She pounded her palm with her fist as she recalled her conversation with Ludwig the day before. "Hare stew! I'd love to have some hare stew again!"

"Hm... Hare stew..."

After Mia described the traits of the hare she'd once had, the chieftain nodded.

"Understood... I will tell the villagers... We will try our best to find one..."

"Most obliged, Chieftain."

With another scrumptious dinner all but guaranteed, Mia merrily departed for her second attempt to meet the Wandering

Wiseman.

After arriving back at the small tent, Mia greeted its elusive inhabitant yet again.

"Good morning, Wandering Wiseman," she announced in what was decidedly an indoor voice. "Are you home?"

Given her volume, it was quite possible that her voice didn't even reach the man inside. Which was, of course, the point.

I'd rather you don't show up, so if you really are in there, could you just, like...pretend you're not?

She waited, hoping the tent's opening would remain shut. Silence ensued...and ultimately endured. Her lips parted in a sly grin.

"In that case, let's wait here a while."

In a repeat of the previous day, she straightened her posture and effectively stood at attention before the tent.

"Your Highness, please have a seat." Ludwig promptly removed his coat and laid it on the ground beside her for a cushion. "Go ahead."

Mia glanced at the coat, gently bent down, picked it up, and patted away a few errant blades of grass that stuck to it.

"No need, Ludwig. If I am to wait, I shall do it standing, with the form and propriety that befits my position. As the one who seeks a favor, I should be displaying the utmost respect, no?"

"Well, I— But..." stammered an increasingly flustered Ludwig. "I suppose that's true, but even my master would not expect you to go that far. Please reconsider—"

She refuted him with a quiet shake of her head.

"That, Ludwig, is up to your master to decide. Am I wrong?"

Mia was of the opinion that when it came to finding fault with a person, the hurdle was never the actual finding of the fault. After all, no self-respecting disparager would allow themselves to be deterred by their target's integrity. The way she saw it, the more unfavorable one's position, the more desperately they dissected their opponent's imperfections. It was simple human nature. Well, it was *her* nature, at least. If she was in a tight spot, she certainly wouldn't hesitate to take someone to task to save herself—just like she was doing right now.

Having visitors arrive and refusing to receive them was rudeness of the highest order. The wiseman had disrespected her.

That was going to be her bargaining chip heading into the eventual negotiation, and she was going to hammer the point all the way to victory.

This was, however, a game at which two could play, and she had to make sure that he never got a turn. To that end, she had to be faultless. Beyond approach. She had to become the *perfect* guest, waiting for her host with the utmost courtesy. With her own backcourt secured, she could then fully focus on her offensive.

Oho ho, you don't stand a chance, because I'm going to hold all *the cards, and I'm going to* bury *you with them.*

She let out a short, triumphant laugh and fixed Ludwig with a look of purpose.

"I stand here, Ludwig, because it is necessary for me to do so. That is all. Therefore, while I appreciate the sentiment, I can accept nothing more." Her gaze drifted skyward, and her eyes grew distant. "I stand here...because it's worth it."

Because it's worth it...

Ludwig closed his eyes. A subtle wave of emotion rose into his throat. He let it out in an unsteady breath. Through those four simple words, Mia had conveyed the depth of her trust in him. She was not personally acquainted with his master. Everything she knew about the man, she'd heard through him.

And yet, here she is, putting all this effort into persuading this perfect stranger to become her headmaster. A man she decided was worth the trouble. Because he, Ludwig, had said so, and she trusted him.

A second wave, hotter and stronger than the last, surged up through his chest and flooded his head. He felt it behind his eyes. It brought him intense joy, along with a burning desire to do everything in his power to realize Mia's goals.

Chapter 13: Making Use of His Life — The Season is Winter, but It Is Not Over Yet—

How many more days of life did he have left? The thought had occurred on a whim.

So he tried counting.

He wasn't afflicted with any terminal disease. He'd simply grown old enough to figure it was time to start counting down instead of up. Eternal life was a fool's ambition. The whole wiseman thing might be a tad overblown, but he was at least possessed of enough good sense to know that much. The lives of man, even in their longest instances, were just short of a century. That left him with maybe a decade. Two at most. And so, the old man looked back on his life. He'd been doing that a lot lately. He had little else to do, after all, and it kept his mind busy, which made the silent company of his looming death just tolerable.

The first conclusion he drew was that it had been a good life. If lives were divided into seasons, his own had doubtlessly crossed into winter. He'd thrived during his nascent spring of budding talent. He'd toiled through his torrid summer of full bloom. He'd reveled in his bountiful autumn of rewarding harvest. Now, it was time for a bleaker season, one of wilt, decline, and decay. But at the same time, it was also a preparatory period in anticipation of a fresh spring.

He'd lived well, freely indulging his desire to know, to study, and to learn, on a quest for knowledge that took him from place to place across the entire continent. After experiencing nearly the full cycle of life, he'd turned his attention to younger generations, to whom he imparted his wisdom without reservation so that their coming years would be as rewarding as his own. Blessed again was his luck, and he successfully delivered many exceptional students to the world. Now, as the thaw of his own winter drew ever nearer, he spent more and more time thinking about how to make the most of

his dwindling life. That was when he heard one of his favorites, Ludwig, was looking for him.

Ludwig had always been particularly bright, and he'd taught him with great care. A naturally sharp mind complemented a meticulous rationality, priming the boy to make astute observations through relentlessly logical analyses. Ever since they'd parted, he had been secretly looking forward to seeing how this remarkable young man would apply his considerable talents.

Then he'd received news that Ludwig now served the Tearmoon Princess. It was, in his opinion, a senseless arrangement, impressive only in its daftness. Everything he knew about royalty and their ilk pointed to the same conclusion; they were as arrogant as they were stupid and as stupid as they were rich. A wealth of youthful talent and unrealized potential...wasted by a life of service under vacuous masters. He would not—could not—stand by and let it happen. And when that thought occurred to him, he knew he'd figured out something else as well—how to make use of the remainder of his life.

The trial of three visits was not for the Wandering Wiseman to gauge the Tearmoon Princess. It wasn't meant for himself at all. The trial was for his student. It offered Ludwig a chance to weigh the true nature of the Great Sage of the Empire and accurately assess her worth. Should she rage at his flagrant insolence and demand his death, it would expose her inner character, paring away the outer shell to reveal an inferior core wholly undeserving of Ludwig's devotion. Conversely, if she were to heed Ludwig's advice and bring herself—even if begrudgingly—here on three separate occasions, it would reveal at least a laudable tolerance both for the inherent irritation of well-meaning dissent as well as the inevitable difficulties of dealing with uncooperative others.

It was, put simply, an experiment. The princess was the substance of interest, and his life was the litmus. At the same time, it was a parting gift from an old man who believed he'd found his final purpose...to a student he valued more than his own breath.

Well, that's how it had begun, at least.

"Screeching bunnies..."

The Wandering Wiseman stared at Mia standing motionless in front of his tent, his shock-widened eyes growing larger with every passing minute. It also bears mentioning that said wiseman was not,

in fact, staring at her from inside his tent. Rather, he was perched atop one of the trees behind it, observing the proceedings from his elevated position—a rather remarkable feat for someone who was supposed to be nearing his end. Frankly, the sprightly old badger probably had at least another three decades left to go.

"Granted, I did tell Ludwig I was going to test her with the three visits, but I sure didn't expect her to just stand there like a statue and wait. I wonder if he told her about my plan..." He shook his head. "No, even if he tattled, the proverb makes no mention of waiting, much less *how* to wait. She doesn't sit. She doesn't banter. She's just...waiting. *Actively* waiting. For me."

His eyes narrowed in thought. Time wasn't free. Many people failed to appreciate this fact, but time was valuable, and when it belonged to the Princess of Tearmoon, even moreso. Every minute, every *second*, was worth its incalculable weight in gold.

"And yet, there she is... Waiting. Giving away her time. For free."

Had she been reading a book while waiting, she would have split her time in two, half used to wait, and half used to read. But she didn't. She simply waited, expending—squandering, even—the full value of her time in order to meet the Wandering Wiseman. Just then, as he gazed at her from his vantage point, he had the distinct feeling that their eyes met.

"She keeps looking at these trees... And she's been doing it a lot this past while, which means... Aha! So she's already aware of my presence!"

...Like hell she was. Just to be clear, our elderly tree percher had stuck leaves all over his clothes so he could hide in the canopy while observing her. The special disguise made him practically invisible among the trees. For someone who'd purportedly said, "When in a forest, wear forest clothes," it was perhaps an appropriate albeit overly literal interpretation.

Anyway, the point is that from where Mia stood, no one could have seen him. Not her, not Dion, and not even experienced Lulu hunters. What he'd just felt was the equivalent of the "Omigosh he/she just looked at me!" phenomenon often experienced by overly enthusiastic fanboys/girls with front row seats to a live performance by their idols. Alas, wizened was the wiseman's mind...

"...So I see, Ludwig. So I see. The only thing to be exposed today...is my own misjudgment of her character and intelligence.

Hm-hm. Wizened is the wiseman's mind, it seems."

...Damn it.

"Well, with that decided, it'd be simply inappropriate to keep her waiting any longer. She's been so patient, after all. Spring will have to wait. It looks like winter's going to be sticking around for a little while longer." His gaze grew pensive. "Still, who'd have thought that I'd spend my final years working under the Tearmoon Princess. Life can really throw some curveballs... But then again, I guess that's what keeps it interesting... Heh."

The old man laughed. It was one of mockery, yes, and it was directed at himself, but it was also a more vivacious sound than any he'd uttered in a long time.

In case anyone is wondering, Mia wasn't actually "just waiting," of course. She was counting the number of leaves on the trees. By the old man's logic, she had split her time in two—half to count the darker leaves, and half to count the brighter leaves. The value of this time wasn't even part of the equation. Fortunately, the Wandering Wiseman never did learn of this, which was probably for the better.

Chapter 14: A Celebratory Pot of Hare Stew

For the third time, Mia strolled blithely down the now-familiar path leading to the Wandering Wiseman's abode. Unlike the previous two days, however, she was not greeted by the same scene at the clearing. As soon as the small tent came into view, she noticed a difference.

"That's..."

An old man was standing in front of the tent. His hair and beard were gray but fine, and he exuded the aura of a forest sage.

So, that must be Ludwig's master. What a shame. If only he'd waited one more day. The leverage I'd have by then would have been truly decisive. She felt a pang of disappointment, but she quickly shook it off. *Still, I've got more than enough to work with as is. When you missed our first meeting, you left me an opening, and I took it. That was your critical mistake. Now, it's all over, because I'm definitely not going to leave any openings for* you*!*

With the air of a gladiator entering a match rigged in her favor, she approached the Wandering Wiseman...

"Greetings. The Wandering Wiseman, I presume? My name is Mia Lunia—"

...And immediately fumbled her delivery. So much for not leaving any openings. In a duel of decorum fought through words, stumbling over your own name was more or less the equivalent of tripping over your own feet and face planting in the ring. She cursed her unreliable tongue.

Gah! For the love of— Why now of all times?! Before the panic could take hold, she quickly switched gears. *Okay, hold on. I'll just start over, and it'll be fine. That was a tiny slip-up. It doesn't count. Besides, what he did was way worse. I still have the advantage.*

After a moment's pause, she lifted her chin and squared her shoulders.

"My name is Mia Luna Tearmoon, Princess of the Tearmoon

Empire, and it would be my pleasure to make your acquaintance."

"The pleasure is all mine, Your Highness, and the honor as well. My name is Galvanus Arminios, and I am humbled by your presence."

The old man looked upon her with a pair of eyes that emitted a deep brilliance, as though they held an ocean of knowledge. There was a quiet intensity to his gaze that told her legs they should be shuffling backward as quickly as possible, but she managed to stop them before she embarrassed herself again. With her feet firmly planted, she looked him over. He was in full ceremonial dress—the sort that would be sufficiently formal for an audience with the emperor. It occurred to her then that she'd made a terrible mistake.

Mia was currently wearing the clothes she'd borrowed from the Lulu. Made of thick, furry pelts, they were delightful to the touch and perfect for sleeping. In fact, she definitely needed a set for herself to wear while lolling around in bed. The workmanship was top-notch, and they were extremely comfortable. The problem was that they were definitely not the kind of clothes one could wear to a meeting with important people.

Ugh, I should have changed into proper clothes before coming here. Damn it, Ludwig! You didn't tell me this old geezer would show up wearing formal dress in the middle of a forest!

She shot a furtive glare at Ludwig before molding her face into a smile.

"My, your attire is rather...striking. I'd heard from Ludwig that you are in favor of dressing pragmatically. That is, the clothes should suit the occasion. Was he wrong?"

"Not at all, Your Highness. I have indeed donned the most appropriate dress for this occasion, for the occasion is your visit. And now that you are here, I must beg your forgiveness for my previous insolence."

At that, he dropped to his knees and prostrated himself before her, head mere inches from the ground. The gesture caught Mia off guard. She hesitated for a moment. Then she replied with a gentle smile.

"My forgiveness? Never. We are the ones who have come to ask a favor. It is only natural that we wait for you to make the time."

Oho ho, I have you now. Forgive you just like that? Think again! Do you have any idea how insolent you were? You were so *insolent! If you want my forgiveness, then you'd better be good and accept our terms!*

On the outside, she just kept smiling.

"I must say though, I'm so very glad we've finally met. Your reputation precedes you, and we've come with a request."

"Absolutely, Your Highness. Your wish is my command."

"I realize that you might not— Wait, what?" She had to blink a few times before the meaning of his reply registered. "U-Uh, I don't believe I've told you what it is we'd like you to do."

"The particulars matter not, Your Highness, so long as you wish it. If you wish for me to acquire intelligence from foreign nations, then I shall infiltrate them myself and slip in amongst their crowds. If you wish for me to go to the frontlines with a spear in hand, then I shall sharpen its blade and charge with the vanguard." He lifted his head and looked at her, his eyes still imbued with that quiet intensity. "You need only speak it. So tell me, Your Highness. What is your wish?"

Wh-What in the moons is happening?

His proclamation of fealty left Mia thoroughly befuddled. Only with great effort did she manage to rally enough of her wits to process the implications. For reasons unclear to her, her opponent in this negotiation had just offered her a direct path to victory. Her skin began tingling. She'd missed the feeling. It was the sensation of a cresting wave under her feet—the kind that would push her up and over her immediate hurdles. Being a veteran surfer of figurative waves, she wasn't about to let this one go. In fact, she'd better hop on it before it changed its mind. She promptly explained her request.

"My wish..." she said, promptly explaining her request, "is to have you be the headmaster of the school I'm building."

"A school, you say..."

"Yes. Princess Town is currently being built in Viscount Berman's domain. I plan to turn it into an academy city, where gifted children from across the empire will gather..."

"Gifted children? How exactly do you—"

"Regarding that, Master," interjected Ludwig, "Her Highness has already acquired the cooperation of the Central Orthodox Church. She intends to have gifted children from the orphanages sent to the school, where they will be enrolled for free."

"I see. It's certainly true that proficiency in using one's mind depends not on wealth or status... The insight Her Highness displays is most impressive..."

Ludwig's comment seemed to resonate with the old man, and he nodded fervently at his student before turning back toward Mia, his eyes now brimming with admiration. Upon meeting his approving gaze, Mia's smile grew just the slightest bit smug.

Hm-hmm! That's right! I am *impressive! Tell it like it is, old man!*

She was never one to pass up a chance to gloat, even if she only did so in her own head.

"And that's not all, Master, for Her Highness's plans go even further. She sees these children as the next generation of young talent. They will be positioned to effect significant reform, and through them, she hopes to fundamentally eradicate the toxic anti-agriculturalist beliefs that plague the empire to this day."

The old man gasped with audible amazement. "Weeping willows, Ludwig! Are you serious? That's..."

He looked once again at Mia, this time with double the admiration. She, rather than gloating twice as hard, merely lifted an eyebrow.

Say what now?

Her primary—and maybe only significant—goal with respect to Saint Mia Academy was making sure Cyril Rudolvon successfully developed that new strain of wheat. Toxic anti-agriculturalist beliefs were something she neither cared about nor understood. Not that it mattered, of course...

Well, I have no idea what Ludwig's talking about, but since it's coming from him, it can't hurt to go along with it. Besides, his master seems to like the idea too.

...Because Mia wasn't in the business of gauging the merits of policy and procedure. She was all about riding every wave that came her way. So, she put her hands on her hips and proudly thrust out her chin.

"That's exactly right."

"To that end," added Ludwig, "Her Highness is already thinking about employing a Perujin princess as a lecturer."

"Perujin, eh? The agricultural country... Their expertise is undoubtedly of great value to the empire," said the wiseman, pausing to think for a moment before continuing. "You realize...that if it all works out as planned... This is going to be a landmark accomplishment. The kind that changes the very course of history." Emotion crept into his voice and gaze as he went on. "Who would have thought...that at the end of my life, when I should have

nothing left but to wait for my aging flesh to rot off my bones... I'd instead be granted the chance to assist in such a glorious undertaking."

What in the moons are they going on about...

Meanwhile, Mia had no clue what the two men were getting so excited about. Feeling rather lost, she figured she'd at least make sure her original objective would be fulfilled.

"I'm glad you two find this topic so interesting, but if I could just confirm with the Wandering Wiseman—"

"Please, Your Highness," interrupted the old man. "You are the Great Sage of the Empire. As your vassal, I can hardly have you referring to me as a 'wiseman.' Call me Galv."

"Well, if you say so. Galv, then. Allow me to make a formal request. Would you be willing to take on the role of headmaster at my academy?"

Galv the Wandering Wiseman lowered his head in a deep bow and answered in a tone of real reverence.

"It would be my absolute honor, Your Highness."

She looked down at his inclined head and felt a swelling sense of triumph.

Hah! Like I thought! He is *a total pushover!*

She beamed with intense satisfaction. So genuine was her delight that it actually masked the smugness of her grin.

"Oh, that reminds me. Could I interest you in some dinner, Galv? Now that we've finally met, I'd like to commemorate the occasion with a modest feast, and I'd love for you to join us."

That night, a great feast was held in the Lulu village with the Wandering Wiseman in attendance. The main dish was the hare stew that Mia had requested.

"Gadzooks! There are few things in the world I enjoy more than hare stew. I can't believe you went out of your way to prepare this for me..."

Moved by her ostensibly thoughtful choice of cuisine, the Wandering Wiseman redoubled his commitment toward the princess, swearing to serve her with all his heart and soul.

Chapter 15: The Old Wiseman's Final Lesson —Ludwig Seeks Advice—

In the wee hours of morning, after the feast in the Lulu village wrapped up, Ludwig stood outside the chieftain's house. Constructed from an interlocking pattern of massive logs, the wooden structure sat on a raised platform with a set of stairs connecting its entrance to the ground. Galv, who was staying with the chieftain that night, appeared in the doorway.

"Huh... Who's that? Oh, it's you, Ludwig."

He descended halfway down the stairs and sat down on one of the steps. Turbid liquid swirled in the wooden cup he held. He took a swig, let out that characteristic sigh of the inebriated when downing a particularly satisfying gulp of strong spirits, and glanced up. Pale light, filtered through the forest canopy, streamed onto his face, which glowed with a rosy sheen. The man had clearly been enjoying a solo after-party of sorts in the form of a moonlit drinking spree.

The sight of this red-cheeked Galv surprised Ludwig. As long as he'd known him, his master had always seemed impervious to the effects of alcohol. In fact, he'd never seen him drunk. Until now. And the old man seemed to enjoy his state of intoxication, judging by his euphoria.

"Don't you think you've had a bit too much to drink, Master?" asked Ludwig, his brows furrowing in concern.

Galv shot him a look of annoyance, though it was betrayed by his wide and mischievous grin.

"Maybe I have. But whose fault do you think that is, Ludwig? *Yours*. Look what you've done, man. You just had to go and set up this marvel of a meeting. I was supposed to wither away in some godforsaken corner of the forest, unseen and unheard. Well, so much for that. Now I have to work until these old bones give out on me. My plan to die in obscurity has been completely ruined."

His eyelids drooped a little, and he spoke with a mild slur, but

the sarcasm was unmistakable; there was far too much enthusiasm in his voice to interpret his words otherwise. Ludwig was glad for his master's ebullience, but it seemed he'd have to give up on the original purpose of his visit; he could hardly consult Galv for advice in his current state of stupor.

"Here for some advice, I presume?"

He looked at his master with a start. A pair of bright eyes peered back at him through the half-open lids. Their gaze was as sharp as ever. He shrugged helplessly and lowered himself onto the same step as his master. After a quick breath to steady himself, he spoke.

"Yes, actually. I've been thinking...that Her Highness should lay claim to the throne. I strongly believe she should become empress, and I intend to help her do so. To that end, I would like to request your aid, Master." Knowing the old man's distaste for oblique dialogue, he had gotten straight to the point.

"Huh... Empress..." Galv stared into his cup of alcohol, thoughts swirling in his head like the murky particles in his drink. His eyes narrowed. "I see. Her Highness is wise. Wise enough to deserve her title 'Great Sage of the Empire.' With her at the helm, the empire may indeed chart a better course. But."

Galv fixed Ludwig with a piercing look that made him flinch.

"Let me ask you one thing, Ludwig."

"Certainly. What is it?" He straightened in anticipation of the question.

When Galv next spoke, it was in a voice he knew well—he'd heard its soft depth whenever his master had wished to impress upon him something very important.

"What is your reason for wishing to see her become empress? Is it because of her wisdom?"

Ludwig faltered. The question caught him off guard, not because he had no answer, but because the answer seemed so obvious. He briefly considered the possibility of it being a trick question before discarding the thought, choosing instead to nod.

"It is indeed, Master. Her wisdom rivals your own. Should she become empress, I have no doubt she will make a fine leader and rid the empire of its pernicious—"

"Then what if she were not wise?"

That gave him pause. He mused on the question for a moment before frowning in confusion.

“I’m sorry. I’m not sure what you mean.”

“Let me put it another way... What if she were to employ her intellect for misguided ends? What would you do then?”

“She wouldn’t ever do such a thing. Her intellect is impeccable.”

“Intellect can be as impeccable as it is evil, Ludwig,” said the wiseman in an astoundingly sober tone. “The foolish do not have sole agency over evil. Just as there is the evil of fools and the good of fools, there is the good and evil of the wise. The honed mind is as a blade. A sharper one cuts better, but it still cuts any which way.”

He fell silent for a moment, questioning Ludwig not with his words but with his gaze. Then he continued.

“With that in mind, Ludwig, I ask again. For what reason do you serve her? Is it because of her intellect? Or is there something else?”

“I...”

Ludwig found himself at a loss for words.

“That reason is crucial, for it will determine the trajectory of your actions...and may one day even point them counter to hers.” The old master let out a subdued laugh. “I advise you, then, to elucidate its precise nature.”

That night, Ludwig had a dream. It was as strange as it was ominous. In it, he witnessed the decline of the Tearmoon Empire. Stricken by plague and a great famine that emptied its coffers, it was further crippled by an exodus of government officials, all fleeing to foreign lands. He stood in the center of that spiral of despair, working under Princess Mia as he strove tirelessly toward his goal of restoring peace and stability to the empire. But the strange thing was...in the dream, he hated Mia.

The royal daughter was a symbol of incompetence who lived in decadent ignorance while her empire burned around her. She deserved every shred of contempt he could muster. In any other situation, he wouldn’t touch her with a ten-foot pole, much less come to her aid. With the empire teetering on the brink of destruction, however, he had no choice but to swallow his disgust and work with her to save their homeland.

He dreamt of a day on which the two of them went to visit a small village, which through some incredibly good fortune had avoided the plague and experienced only minor famine.

Nevertheless, food was in short supply, and the starving villagers had either given in to thoughts of despair or wallowed in seething hatred of nobles while cursing their own fate. Upon arriving there, Ludwig and Mia received a frosty welcome. The villagers were unfriendly, though not outright hostile. The presence of imperial guards likely dissuaded any attempts at overt violence. They toured the village, expressed their sympathy for the local guards struggling to maintain order, and departed soon after.

While riding in their carriage, Mia said, "Ugh, I want cake. Where can we get some cake, I wonder... Hey, Ludwig, I know there's no bread, but might there be some cake—"

"No, there isn't, because there's no wheat. Cake and bread are both made from wheat."

"Th-They are? I-I see..."

She wilted in disappointment. He glanced at the crestfallen Mia, and his cheek twitched in annoyance.

It's a struggle to find even a small loaf of bread right now, and she wants cake*? I swear, I—*

"Just one would be enough."

"...What?"

"I don't want too much. Just one whole cake."

One whole cake? Of all the decadent, hedonistic, shameless *demands...*

His annoyance turned to disgust. This, he thought with an embittered sigh, was why he couldn't stand nobles.

"If I could somehow get my hands on one whole cake," she continued, "I'd have enough for the village. Maybe not the adults, but at least all the children..."

Ludwig's thoughts ground to a halt.

"...Wha—"

"I mean, I'd prefer a big cake in that case. With enough strawberries on it to go around. Those villagers seemed so upset. If they all got a slice of cake with a strawberry, I'm sure they'd feel much better."

He forcibly rewound his mental reel. Then, he carefully let the gears spin, the machinery of his memory crunching slowly through the last few seconds as he parsed her statements again.

She...wants to share this imaginary cake with others? I thought for sure it was all for herself.

At least, that was what the Mia he knew—or perhaps thought

he knew—would have meant. As he dwelt on the discrepancy, he became gripped by the urge to test her with a question that was, on the whole, a little mean.

"Tell me something, Your Highness. Suppose that I was able to supply you with just enough cake for one person. What would you do with it?"

"Really?! You have cake?!"

"I said *suppose*. We're talking about hypotheticals here."

"Ugh, fine... W-Well, let me think.... A-Are we assuming that one person is, you know, a really big fellow? Like one of those guards?"

"No, we are assuming that one person is you, Your Highness. One slice, exactly enough for yourself."

There was, of course, no cake. The question, therefore, amounted to little more than fodder for idle banter—a conundrum for the weary mind, offering relief through distraction. Despite that, Mia fell into near-silent contemplation. Rather than bat away the abstract—and admittedly, somewhat obnoxious—query, her brows creased in pained deliberation as low hums of mental effort escaped her lips.

"Hmmm... Hnnngh... W-Well, in that case, I suppose I'll have to settle for just one bite. Oh, but the strawberry is more than a bite, isn't it? And if I get the strawberry, then I'll have to... Which means..."

She continued mumbling for some time. Ludwig regarded her, feeling like he'd just taken a sledgehammer to the brain.

She's...seriously fretting over her answer?

The hypocrite wouldn't fret; she'd simply claim to give it all away. The egotist wouldn't fret; she'd proudly eat it all herself. Mia was neither. She fretted. Faced with the choice, she responded with genuine distress before making her stance clear—she would have the strawberry to herself. Implicit in that answer was a second meaning—so long as she had the strawberry to herself...

There existed people who, so long as they had enough to eat for themselves, were willing to share the rest with others. Not exactly saints in the making, perhaps, but they were still better than most aristocrats. The nobility was largely composed of those who wouldn't think of giving away provisions to the people until their own meals were guaranteed, wherein the definition of "guaranteed" was an ever-moving goalpost—those with food for a day craved

enough for two, those with two for three, then a month, a year, a decade, and so on.

That was the impression Ludwig had of nobles, and he'd always thought Mia to be the same. Therein lay the source of his shock.

"Hm? What's with the look, Ludwig? Do you have something to say?"

Her question roused him from his stupefaction, and he shook his head.

"No... No, I don't. I was just...surprised. I thought you'd keep it all for yourself."

"My! Rude! Did you seriously think that after seeing the state of that village, I'd keep the cake all to myself?!"

"Absolutely. I never doubted it for a moment," he replied without hesitation.

She glared at him and groused through clenched teeth, "Grrr... Stupid four-eyes..."

A flurry of mumbled protests followed before she huffed out a deep breath to calm herself.

"The fact you'd think that... Seeing someone was in trouble, and knowing I was in a position to help, that I'd choose to ignore them... Honestly, it hurts a little," she said, shaking her head. "I'd feel just terrible doing something like that."

"Would you now..." he replied with sincere admiration. "It seems, Your Highness, that you might actually be a half-decent human being."

"What?! What do you mean *half*-decent? Ugh, stupid four-eyes and the stupid things you say... I swear, you can be so rude..."

"Says the one who consistently refers to me as 'stupid four-eyes.' Honestly, between the two of us, I'm pretty sure it's you who needs to watch your language, Your Foul-Tongued Highness."

Though his retort carried its usual bite, he began to see her in a different light. The princess he served was doubtlessly flawed...but she was, perhaps, still a princess worth serving.

In time, he came to know her better. She was indeed arrogant, but despite her grumbled protests, she always bent an ear to his counsel. She was indeed cowardly, but she did not flee, choosing instead to stay and struggle in hopes of restoring the empire. She was indeed a slow learner, but she endured his scathing remarks with teary resilience and a dogged, desperate effort to catch up.

And in time, he discovered in himself a budding wish...to see

this foolish princess be rewarded, even if only a little, because by God, she was trying. It grew and grew, and before long, it had sprouted into a dream. If there existed a timeline where the empire successfully averted disaster and righted its course, he'd like to be there...with her. At her side, giving her advice, supporting her endeavors, and devoting himself as a vassal to her and the empire she would go on to craft. It would, he decided, be a future he wouldn't mind seeing. Then he laughed, the sardonic tone this time directed inward, for he realized that he was not being entirely honest with himself. He certainly didn't mind seeing it, yes, but it was more than that. He was fond of the idea. *Longed* for it even.

Which was why, when he stood there that day, watching Mia kneel under the guillotine's blade...

He woke up.

"What happ— That was...a dream?"

Cold sweat crawled down his back. The scene was still vivid in his mind. Too vivid. The sounds and smells were too visceral. The emotions too real.

"Nonsense... It was just a dream. Her Highness could never be so foolish..."

It was an impossible dream—one so removed from reality as to be insulting to the Great Sage of the Empire. He tried to smile, but it came out as a grimace. Some part of him refused to laugh it off. Deep down, in his gut of guts, he couldn't help but feel it was more than a dream—a memory, perhaps, and an important one at that. Something he couldn't afford to forget. Somehow, he also knew, beyond both reason and doubt, that the girl in his dreams was indeed the princess he served, Mia Luna Tearmoon. On the surface, they couldn't be more different. At their core, they were one and the same.

A vision of the slums appeared in his mind. He remembered seeing her there, rushing to the aid of a child collapsed on the street, and he remembered how she'd nursed him, paying no attention to the filth and grime. Her words echoed, dream and memory merging into one.

Seeing someone was in trouble, and knowing I was in a position to help...

He nodded to himself. When one saw a child in trouble, helping them was the natural thing to do. Whether it was due to moral

integrity or political calculation, the conclusion was the same. But even so. Even if the vectors of virtue, protocol, and reason all pointed in the same direction, and it was patently necessary to do so... Just how many nobles would lift with their hands the squalid bodies of the poor and vulnerable? Even he, a commoner, had initially balked at the thought of entering the slums. Mia hadn't. Not when she'd entered, and not when she'd seen the child. Because that was her. If Mia Luna Tearmoon saw someone in trouble, and she knew she was in a position to help, she'd feel terrible if she didn't. *That* was the essence of her person.

"...So that's it. I finally get it now."

He realized at last. His admiration for her overflowing intellect remained unchanged, for it deserved no less reverence than before. His loyalty, however, had shifted its bearings.

"It's her *essence* to which I should devote myself."

The thought brought with it a flood of emotions. They filled his chest and spilled over to his eyes and nose. He felt as if he'd regained a long lost memory... Or, perhaps, been reunited with a faded and unfulfilled dream.

It all makes sense now... It's not the Great Sage of the Empire. It never was. It's the person inside. My dream...has always been to serve Her Highness...and realize her goals.

The next day, Ludwig returned to his master. Upon seeing the tranquil smile on his student's face, Galv responded in kind. This time, his hands were empty; the drink was nowhere to be seen. After all, acknowledging his student's resolve while drunk would be *rude*.

"It looks like you have your answer."

"Yes, Master."

"Let's hear it then. What is your reason, Ludwig, for wishing to see her become empress?"

He didn't answer immediately. Instead, he closed his eyes and set his jaw, taking a moment to fully digest the question. Then, he spoke.

"It is because Princess Mia...is the kind of person who may err in ignorance...but will never knowingly repeat a mistake."

She might not know that there were people in trouble. But once she was aware, she would never leave them to their fates. She possessed a soul capable of loathing such neglect. That was why he

pledged to her his loyalty, and his life.

"If she were ever dispossessed of that wisdom... If she ever lost her way... Then I shall tell her so. So long as I do, she will never choose the wrong path."

Galv nodded in satisfaction at his answer.

"Well done. I see you've found your own conviction."

"Yes, Master. I'm grateful for your advice."

"And for you, it will probably be my last. Well, hop along then. I believe there is a princess who needs serving. Go on, Ludwig, and serve her well."

"Yes, Master. With all my heart and soul. To that end, I look forward to your help as well."

He lowered his head in a deep bow.

Meanwhile, the princess in question was entirely unaware she'd been at the center of such a gripping drama of personal discovery and devotion.

"Oho ho! And to think that Ludwig was stressing so much about this meeting. He's a pushover! They're all pushovers! Once I got involved, none of them stood a chance!"

Reveling in blissful ignorance and feeling supremely pleased with herself, she wore a wide grin throughout her trip back to the Berman manor. Granted, some questionable causal attributions notwithstanding, her sense of triumph was well-deserved. With the addition of Galv, along with all the students who answered his call, the staffing issues of Saint Mia Academy were solved in one go. Of course, she'd later run into another problem when hiring the Perujin Princess Arshia Tafrif Perujin as lecturer led to a minor uproar, but that's another story. For the moment, she could rest easy in the knowledge that her school was safe.

Chapter 16: Princess Mia and Her Devotees

“Hnnngh... I feel...terribly tired...”

Now back at the imperial capital, Mia woke in her soft and fluffy bed feeling particularly lackadaisical. She rubbed her face against the thick, furry nightclothes she’d received from the Lulu and all but purred with pleasure.

“I want to go back to sleep...”

The journey by carriage from the Holy Principality of Belluga to Tearmoon, soon followed by a visit to the Newmoon District before departing for the Berman Viscounty, with an extra excursion to the Lulu village thrown in, had been one hell of an endurance test, and even Mia, with the infinite energy of youth, was feeling rather spent.

“I-It’s definitely not because of all that standing I did in the forest is finally catching up to me! Nope! I mean, I’m still a young and healthy thirteen-year-old. I’m not old enough to know fatigue,” she muttered, justifying her not-fatigue to no one in particular.

She conveniently left out the part about the twenty-odd years her psyche had under its belt.

“Milady, I’m told breakfast is ready. Would you like to have some now?” asked Anne as she entered the room.

Mia eyed her drowsily.

“Is it just me...” she mumbled, barely coherent, “or are the mornings coming earlier every year?”

Nevertheless, she got up, drawn by the allure of breakfast, and stretched. After trying unsuccessfully to rub the sleep from her eyes, she tottered toward the door.

“Milady, how about we get you changed first? I don’t think you should walk out in those clothes...”

Anne gently turned Mia away from the door and removed her nightclothes, taking a quick moment to confirm the quality of her pearlescent skin, now exposed in its entirety save for some regal

undergarments. Seeing no blemishes or traces of sweat, she promptly turned to the wardrobe. Faced with its abundant options, she swiftly considered a number of factors, including the weather outside, the temperature inside, and Mia's likely range of movement, to determine the optimal attire for her mistress.

Reaching into the wardrobe, she produced a gorgeous yellow dress. Designed for comfort indoors, its looser cut hid the contours of the body, maintaining decorum while eschewing the need for a corset. She dressed the zombified Mia in it with expert deftness, practiced motions placing fabric over skin without the need for the wearer's cooperation. It was definitely a high-level maid technique, performable only by seasoned veterans. For Anne, who'd never been particularly handy, the only path to proficiency was through grueling, tireless repetition, and her present competence was proof that she'd walked it.

That's right. It wasn't just horse riding. In addition to honing her abilities as a maid, she'd been applying herself to her studies at Saint-Noel, on top of learning to cook, all so she could be useful to Mia. The slow accumulation of hard-earned skills had laid down a solid bedrock of expertise while paving the path to true mastery, which she now walked step by diligent step. None of this was in any way apparent to Mia...but Anne liked it that way. If her mistress could notice changes in her dressing technique—be they for better or worse—then that meant she still had a long way to go. In Anne's opinion, true maids did their job unnoticed. For those they served, it should seem like daily chores and matters of personal care simply took care of themselves.

"Mmm, I must say..." said Mia with a yawn, watery eyes still heavy with sleep. "You're really spoiling me today, Anne. Thank you. As always."

The statement of appreciation, so genuine and unguarded, strummed her heartstrings, filling her chest with harmonics of joy. She didn't think she deserved it. After all, she was just doing her job. Nevertheless, she couldn't help but feel a welling happiness at the acknowledgment.

"Th-Thank you, milady." A few seconds later, she corrected, "I-I mean, you're welcome."

With her yellow dress properly affixed to her person, Mia shambled down the hall.

Ah, I want to go back to bed…and do a whole lot of nothing for the rest of the day…

Her lethargic thoughts were mirrored in her lazy, foot-dragging gait. When she finally reached the cafeteria, she shuffled toward the long dining tables and plopped her delicate rump down on one of the seats before opening her mouth in another yawn. The head chef approached her.

"Good morning, Your Highness."

"Gwood mworning…"

She groggily rubbed her eyes and blinked a few more times before turning to look at him. His brows furrowed in concern.

"You seem rather tired."

"I suppose I am. Inspecting Princess Town, among other things, has kept me quite busy lately, and I'm feeling a little spent. Just between the two of us, I wouldn't mind a more generous menu today."

"Generous, you say?"

"Yes. Exchanging a few breakfast items for sweets, for example…"

The chef fell silent, his expression unreadable. A few seconds later, he turned and walked away. Figuring her proposal had exasperated him, she sighed.

"Well, I was definitely pushing my luck there. I can't really expect them to bring out a bunch of sweets in the morning. I mean, the food here is good and everything, but I just wish I could have some cake right now. Or even a few cookies. They'd do wonders as a morning pick-me-up. Oh well. So much for that…" she said, glumly accepting that her sweet tooth would remain unsatisfied.

Which would be why she almost shrieked in astonishment when the chef returned and placed a plate of something decidedly unbreakfast-like in front of her.

"My! Th-This is… Cake?!"

A yellow pastry sat on the plate. There was a whiff of fruity piquancy in its fresh-from-the-oven aroma that, along with its soft, spongy texture, exerted an irresistible pull on her senses. Her audible slurp and gulp was, if not entirely polite, understandable.

"This early in the morning?! A-Are you sure this is okay?"

She stared at the chef with disbelief in her eyes.

"Yes. Your Highness seemed tired, so…we made this for you."

The stocky chef scratched his cheek, glad for her delight but

also embarrassed by its sheer effusiveness.

"B-But, isn't it bad for me to be eating sweets all the time? I remember you said something like that before."

Despite her question, she wrapped her arms around the cake with the kind of hunched posture that evoked the words *my precious*. The chef answered with a gentle smile.

"I'm glad Your Highness remembers. I did indeed say that, and I still stand by my words. Eating sweets with excessive frequency will harm your health. That's why..." Pride entered his expression. "I decided to challenge myself. That cake is a new creation of mine, made with a mix of vegetables."

"V-Vegetables?! You can't be serious!"

She stared at the cake with new eyes. She even spun it around a few times, examining it from all angles. It still looked like a cake. There was no vegetable-ness to it at all. She prodded it cautiously with her fork. Then she scooped out a small piece and, with a gulp of resolve, put it into her mouth.

"Mmmm... *Mmmmmm*!"

Slowly but surely, her guarded expression melted into pure bliss.

"It's sweet and...and...delicious! Mmmm!" She let out a sigh of pleasure before looking back at the chef. "Oh, you terrible, terrible person. You almost had me there. Vegetable cakes," she said with a laugh. "As if something this sweet could be made with vegetables."

"As a matter of fact, Your Highness, in their natural state, many vegetables *are* sweet. For this cake, we used ambermoon tomatoes, ambermoon carrots, and mini kabocha squashes to give that tarty sweetness."

"My... You mean you can make something this good using vegetables?"

She looked at the cake with astonishment now. The truth of the cake's ingredients was a stunning revelation for her, but it was the chef's next statement that truly robbed her of breath.

"Indeed we can. Moreover, because it's made with vegetables, it's good for your health as well."

"What?! Y-You mean... I can eat as much of this cake as I want and be perfectly fine?!"

She stared at the cake for the third time, regarding it like some sort of impossible dream that bent the very laws of reality.

"Uh, well, not exactly, but within reason... For example, it's perfectly fine to have this in the morning," he said, then he shook

his head. It was clear that Mia was no longer listening.

"Ah, wonderful. Just wonderful..." she said, her hands a blur as she split the cake and started shoveling pieces into her mouth. "You've done— Mmm. A wonderful job— Mmmmm. Head Chef. I have the— *Mmmmmmm*! The utmost respect for your skill! It's—"

She suddenly stopped, her fork inserted halfway into her next piece.

"Head chef... Tell me something. Did you come up with this recipe...just for me?"

"It is our duty as subjects to care for and ensure the wellness of His Majesty and Your Highness."

He respectfully lowered his head.

"My..." Mia was moved. "Such thoughtful diligence. Please accept my formal thanks, Head Chef. Your cooking is a marvel, and I am impressed beyond words. By the way...how many of these did you make?"

She managed to parlay her compliments into another cake. Emboldened by her success, she tried two more times before Anne finally put her foot down and barred the head chef from complying with any further requests.

In other words, it was business as usual for Mia and her daily shenanigans.

Chapter 17: Princess Mia... Gives a Do-or-Die Presentation

How did it come to this?!

The sheer all-consuming cruelty of the reality confronting Mia filled her with despair.

Why? Why? Why me?!

The whole of the world seemed to darken before her eyes as she desperately looked for a way to solve her problem.

Turning the clock back a little bit...

After meeting up with Bel and Lynsha, Mia left the rest of the work in Ludwig's capable hands and returned to Saint-Noel.

"Finally! I can sit back and relax!"

With a wide grin, she stepped into the student council office, feeling almost a little nostalgic; she hadn't been here in quite some time.

"Hello, everyone. I'm terribly sorry for my prolonged absence. Thank you for holding down the fort while I was gone."

After apologizing to her fellow council members, she started dealing with all the work that had been piling up.

Granted, it's basically all paperwork, and I certainly have no business second-guessing anything Rafina already okayed, she thought as she started mindlessly signing the documents on her desk.

Expecting to cruise through all the paperwork, her eyes almost popped out of their sockets when she looked over one of the papers that had come to her from Rafina. Detailed on it was a new problem —one that was bigger, badder, and harder to stomach than even the ones her academy city faced. Specifically...

"Huh? What? Why? Wh-Where did all the sweets go?"

One of the documents from Rafina listed the new menu schedule for the cafeteria that was going to be implemented, and it had far fewer sweets than before. Even Mia's favorite, the fruit tart, was gone.

Wh-What happened?! H-How has it come to this?!

She was almost in tears.

"Oh, while you were gone, the three of us did some research into dietetics. It was quite fun, wasn't it?" said Rafina, glancing at her two co-researchers.

Tiona and Chloe nodded, and the three shared a chuckle.

Wh-What in the moons is that?!

Mia, for her part, was completely bewildered. She had no idea what "dietetics" was, but if it meant taking away her sweets, then she was pretty sure she didn't like it. Faced with this mysterious foe, she made an effort to regather her wits and fight back.

"I-I see... So you researched, uh...dietetics..."

"Yes. It'd been a blind spot for me as well. I'd never fully considered the relationship between the food we eat and our health, so I was astonished to learn there was a field of study like this. And I remembered that you'd mentioned we should look after the health of our students, so we reviewed our cafeteria menu and decided that in order to better balance its nutritional content, we should reduce the amount of sweets and add more vegetables."

I-I said no such thing! Never in a million years!

Realizing that denying the claim would do her no good, she kicked her mind into overdrive, trying to think of a way to solve this problem. When it came to protecting her sweets, the Great Sage of the Empire spared no expense.

"Of course," said Rafina with a frown, "even though it's good for their health, if we plan to trade sweets for vegetables... I suspect there will be some pushback. Dealing with that will probably be the hardest part of making this happen."

Yes! That's it!

Seeing a way out of this predicament, Mia wasted no time taking advantage of it. She scrunched up her face into a look of grave concern and nodded.

"Yes, you're right. That's a very serious problem. Therefore, we might want to consider keeping things the way they are for now, and hold on to this as a topic for future consideration..."

"No, it's one of the policies that you put forward, so even if it'll take some work, I'd like to see it through."

Rafina gave her a look of passionate determination. Tiona and Chloe responded in kind.

Since when did you three become best buddies?! Argh!

“Interesting. For those who must rule, the maintenance of their health is certainly important, but I must confess this is my first time hearing of the term as well. Dietetics, was it? Hm... Ah, so that’s why you were so obsessed with mushrooms. Once again, your foresight amazes me, Mia,” Sion said with genuine admiration.

Abel and Sapphias followed suit, nodding their agreement. No one made any attempt to oppose the motion, to Mia’s dismay. The lack of sweet teeth in the room was profoundly confounding.

Augh! My sweets, they’re slipping away... I need to do something... But what?

Refusing to give up, she kept thinking in spite of the overwhelming majority against her. She was surrounded. She was alone. But sometimes...a girl just had to stand up for her desserts. There were some fights that were worth fighting, and this was one of them.

What can I do to save my sweets? I need an idea... Something... Anything! Come on!

A vision of the head chef’s portly face flashed across her mind. His voice, deep and throaty like a bear’s growl, echoed in her mind.

“*We developed this recipe for Your Highness. Behold, the vegetable cake.”*

“That’s it! The vegetable cake!”

And that was when it came to her. Not just an idea but an inspiration, brilliant enough to turn the tides of fate and reverse her sugarless future. Her mind, so used to relying on the intake of sweets to hit peak performance, now achieved the same feat unfed, driven by a primal urge to defend its precious fuel. There was beauty to this fervor, like an ouroboros of mutual aid, as need guarded function and function fed need.

...Or maybe she just had a sugar addiction. In any case, after a long, quiet moment, she spoke.

“Whether to include more vegetables in the student diet...or to preserve the quality of the sweets menu... In my opinion, we should do both. To that end, Miss Rafina, I propose an addition to the meal schedule in the form of cakes that are good for your health.”

“Cakes that are good for your health?” Rafina echoed in surprise. “I’ve never heard of such a thing. Do they really exist?”

Mia nodded with the confidence of experience.

“They certainly do. The cakes I speak of represent the pinnacle of Tearmoon’s ingenuity and technical prowess, and they are called

vegetable cakes!"

"V-Vegetable cakes?!"

She proceeded to give a fervent presentation, on which hung the fate of her beloved treats.

"First, for the new cafeteria menu, the sweets can be left unchanged. Instead, we can remove some particularly unpopular items, such as the vegetable salad, and that thick vegetable soup. In their place, we shall add the vegetable cake."

"B-But, Princess Mia, if we don't cut down on the number of sweets, we won't solve the problem of people eating too much of them, will we?" asked a hesitant Chloe.

Mia gently shook her head.

"That won't be a problem, Chloe, because the vegetable cake is so good... Mmm, so good... You won't be able to resist..."

That seemed to click for Rafina. She nodded.

"Ah, I see what you mean to do. Rather than removing tasty items from the menu and replacing them with healthy but less appealing ones, you'd rather expand the menu to include items both tasty *and* healthy. And you have just the recipe in mind."

"That's exactly right, Miss Rafina."

The two traded comprehending nods.

"You've outdone me again, Princess Mia. I hadn't even been aware of the connection between the cafeteria's menu and our students' health. Meanwhile, you've already prepared a recipe for its improvement."

"This is news to me too," said an astonished Tiona. "I've been to the capital a few times, but I've never heard of a cake like that."

"Neither have I," agreed Chloe. "I've never seen it mentioned in books. Princess Mia is so knowledgeable."

The three girls showered Mia with gazes of admiration, which had the effect of lighting a fire under her ego. She crossed her arms and nodded with smug satisfaction.

"If my idea is approved, then I can send word to Lunatear right away. So what'll it be?"

The meeting ended with Mia promptly penning a letter addressed to her faithful head chef in the imperial capital, asking him for the recipe for the vegetable cake. The pastry she introduced to the menu would go on to prove exceptionally popular, becoming a renowned speciality of the Saint-Noel cafeteria. Later, after

graduating, she would recognize the accomplishment of her head chef and present him with the Mia Medal of Freedom.

To the profound indifference of all of you, certainly, but anyway...

Chapter 18: Princess Mia… Empathizes with the Cowardly

Phew… That was a close one.

After successfully rescuing the sweets with her vegetable cake presentation, Mia blew out a satisfied job-well-done breath. Then she picked up her cup and took a sip of her black tea. Or, she would have, had Rafina not immediately rained on her parade.

"Well then, now that's settled… Shall we move on to the main topic, Princess Mia?"

Main topic? There's more?

She stared at Rafina, cup held awkwardly before her. Her confusion was mirrored in Sion and Abel. Sapphias was equally befuddled, though that was hardly shocking. Tiona and Chloe, for some reason, showed no surprise. Regardless, all eyes turned to Rafina who, with a deliberate motion, presented them with a book.

"This is a manuscript of *The Book of Those Who Slither*. It's the bible of the Chaos Serpents and their secret society of cultists."

"Wha—"

Mia was stunned. Her eyes darted toward Sapphias.

"Miss Rafina," she said in a low voice, "are you sure we should be talking about that here? I mean…"

She left the rest unsaid, though not unexpressed. Employing her high-powered gaze, she communicated her warning through the universal language of a wide-eyed look of panic.

Are you out of your goddamn mind?! There's a Serpent sitting literally right there*! What in the moons are you thinking?!*

Her frantic transmission was ostensibly deciphered by the receiver, who nodded back.

"It's all right. I know."

Mia let out a breath of relief at this answer, only for the next one to catch in her throat.

"I think," Rafina continued, "it's about time we asked Sapphias to join our cause."

She doesn't know! Oh sweet moons she doesn't know!

Only with a strained gulp did Mia manage to stifle a scream. Rafina kept speaking.

"He's been very helpful while you were gone, you know? Of course, he still has some ways to go, but I think at this point, it's fair to grant him our trust. At the end of the day, there's never any guarantee that a particular person isn't a Serpent, so we'll simply have to work around that uncertainty."

"Well, I guess that's true, but..."

"Miss Rafina..." said Sapphias, his voice unsteady. "You... You'll trust me?"

The beginnings of a tear was forming in his eye when a thought occurred to him, and he blinked.

"Wait... Secret society of cultists? Um, if you'll forgive me for prying... Would that happen to have something to do with the, erm, rather voluminous number of excerpts from the Holy Book you've been having me transcribe lately after class? And the regular lectures you've been giving every morning, noon, and evening to that strange study group you had me join? The one with all those mysterious men."

Rafina regarded him quietly for a moment before smiling. Her expression was like an early spring breeze, crisp but nipping.

"I'm trusting you, Sapphias."

"R-Right..."

Mia, who watched their exchange from the side, shuddered at the smile.

Moons, she's downright terrifying! So all this time, she's been secretly testing him. I'll bet she's done a full background check on him already too.

The more she thought about it, the more Rafina resembled some sort of shadowy mastermind.

"So? What's in the book?" asked Sion, evidently eager to pull the conversation back on track.

"Hm, put simply... Ways to bring a nation to ruin. A how-to guide for destroying a country, if you will. It describes the process to employ step-by-step and techniques for manipulating the minds of people to amplify the damage, among other things..."

"Wh-What a dreadful book..." Mia said in a trembling voice.

Having been a direct victim of the book's teachings, the methods it spoke of carried a visceral horror for her. She shuddered

as she gazed upon the object responsible for the hopeless devastation and ruin that had once befallen her empire.

"There are more, apparently," added Rafina. "This is only one volume, which contains the chapter titled 'Kingdombane.' We know there must be other volumes with different material inside, considering this one isn't the same as the copy that Belluga had previously obtained."

She held out the book, which Sion took and flipped through, nodding to himself as he did so.

"And if we manage to get our hands on all of these, we might finally be able to peel away this curtain of mystery surrounding the Chaos Serpents..."

Meanwhile, Sapphias, who'd been receiving a quick briefing from Abel and Tiona, stared at the book with pale-faced disbelief.

"Chaos Serpents... You're telling me these...*people* have been hiding in the empire all this time?" he said, pronouncing "people" with a tone often used by children talking about monsters under the bed.

The metaphor was quite apt, since in any other situation, monsters under the bed would elicit amusement, if not outright mockery. They were fictitious, after all, and should be treated as such, for there was real danger in fixating on an imaginary threat. But, this was no common tavern; this was the office of the student council. It was not a place for frivolous banter. Topics brought up in the presence of Saint-Noel's student council had at times carried enough import to sway the fortunes of small countries. A trivial matter would not have made its way into this discussion. Even so, Sapphias couldn't quite bring himself to take it completely seriously.

"Ha ha... Come on, you can't be serious," he said, chuckling as if seeking comfort in denial. "What, is this some sort of initiation? You're trying to trick me, aren't you?"

Fear was evident in his voice. Mia looked at him and felt...relieved.

Right?! Sweet moons, finally, someone's reacting like a normal person. Everyone else was so calm that I was starting to think I *was the crazy one. These people are all like "Oh, a book that* destroys kingdoms*? That's interesting." No! It's not! It's terrifying! And you're supposed to be terrified of terrifying things!*

As she regarded his blanched face, she felt a growing empathy

for him. It was a phenomenon best described as...chickens of a feather, probably. As a result, her attitude toward him softened somewhat.

"If you really don't feel up for it, Sapphias, it's okay to back out. I can't anymore, but you can still run away from all this..."

She had, after all, brought him into the student council because she thought he looked a little serpentine. In other words, she'd never been counting on him to begin with. If he wanted to run, then he was certainly free to do so. She wouldn't stop him. Nor would she stop her princely sweetheart, or her loyal maid, or her reliable-but-a-little-too-preachy four-eyes... She wouldn't stop any of them! In fact, she'd be right there with them, running as fast as she could!

Ugh... Running away sure is a tempting idea right now...

Her empathy for his cowardice ended up draining her of her own courage. To her surprise, his answer was not the one she'd expected.

"Run...away? Ha ha... Ha ha ha... It appears that I've been profoundly underestimated."

He grinned at her.

"Eh?"

She gave him a blank look as he took a knee before her.

"As a proud Bluemoon and scion of the Four Dukes, I can hardly afford to flee while Your Highness is charging into battle. No, I will fight, Your Highness. As long as your banner waves, then so shall I stand at your side. For you, and for my darling, who surely cannot sleep easy knowing such villains abound. Please, Your Highness, I implore you to add me to your ranks."

It was, for all intents and purposes, a pledge of allegiance, declaring himself to be a part of her faction. At last, the heir of Bluemoon, whose family represented one of the four pillars of Tearmoon nobility, had allied himself to Mia's cause. During this moment of great historical significance, Mia...

Ah... So that's it. I'm stuck holding the banner and charging forward now. I wonder if I'll die by an arrow to the head this time... Ugh, that sounds so painful...

...Simply stood there as hope drained from her increasingly glassy eyes.

Chapter 19: Princess Mia… Speaks Passionately about Her Studying Technique (That Involves Overwhelming Through Sheer Numbers)

Mia's days after returning to Saint-Noel proved mostly uneventful, as she steadily caught up on her backlog of work in the student council. Time seemed to fly, and before she knew it, the season had changed. One day, as she walked into the cafeteria in her dorm, her eyes fell on a menu schedule that heralded the arrival of summer.

"Ah, they're starting to bring out the cold soup."

The dormitories in Saint-Noel Academy afforded a degree of choice in diet. Dinner was the same for everyone, but students were allowed to choose from a menu of items for breakfast and lunch. The arrangement was to accommodate the wide variety of students in the school, who hailed from all sorts of countries, each with their own foods and preferences. It was also a convenient way to introduce students to the cultures of their peers. Those who were interested could, in fact, learn a great deal about world cuisines simply by studying their daily meals in the academy.

…Of course, this kind of flexibility also made for plenty of headaches when updating the menu, as the student council had recently discovered.

"It's been pretty cool so far this year, so I hadn't noticed…but it's almost summer, isn't— Hm?" Something stirred in the back of her mind. Something she'd forgotten. "Summer…summer… How odd. I feel like I'm forgetting something about summer…" After some thinking, she arrived at an answer. "Ah, that's right. It's almost time for summer exams. Which…well, I mean…even if my grades aren't *so* great…as long as I pass…"

At Rafina's behest, Saint-Noel operated with policies much more stringent than other schools attended by noble students. Poor

exam scores could very well impede progress through the grades. Students who failed, simply failed. They were offered no mercy, no matter their rank or familial status. The bar for failing was, however, set fairly low, and it wasn't like Mia was horrible at studying. With some effort, she was capable of memorizing enough at the last minute to tide her through her exams.

"As long as I have my sweets, I'll be able to focus... That's right. I'll just get through it with the power of sweets again..."

Fate apparently found her optimism disagreeable, and it promptly made its stance known by having her run into Rafina at the cafeteria.

"Hello, Mia. It's almost time for the summer exams, isn't it?"

"Yes. I just realized that myself. They felt so far away, and then suddenly they're almost here. Time sure flies."

It started out as a casual conversation.

"I'm thinking of bringing it up with the student council next time, but lately, many of the students' grades have been slipping. Some quite significantly."

"My, that's not good at all," said Mia without a lick of irony or self-awareness.

Her own grades were easily one of the slipperiest of the bunch.

"Which is why— I know you're very busy, Mia, so I'm sorry for adding more to your plate, but I'm thinking of having the student council run a campaign."

"A...campaign?"

"Yes. We'll take the grades of students who did well in the exam and post them in the hallway to motivate everyone else to improve."

"Ah, I see. That sounds interesting. I hope it goes well."

In the previous timeline, Mia's grades ranged somewhere between "not good" and "abysmal." Having been a permanent resident of the lowest third, she naturally assumed the campaign would have nothing to do with her.

"Now, while regular students are certainly free to set their own goals, for those of us in leadership roles, I believe there is a certain obligation to act as role models."

Mia wrinkled her nose. She was sensitive to metaphorical smells, and this conversation was starting to take on a very fishy one. Somewhere in her head, an indicator flipped from green to yellow.

“U-Uh, I’m not sure I follow...”

“Well, the crux of the matter is that every year, the members of the student council have their exam grades made public. We announce them to the student body in an official statement.”

“...Eh?” It took a few seconds for Mia’s jaw to remember how to close itself. “Y-You mean, it doesn’t matter how good...or bad our grades are?”

“Yes, exactly. Of course, I have every confidence in your academic abilities, Mia, but it’s just that you’ve been so busy lately, and I was a little concerned you hadn’t found the time to keep up with your studies. I know you’ll probably prove me wrong, but you know, I thought I’d give you a heads up, just in case. Oh, but even if your grades slip a little, as long as you don’t fail, nothing much will happen, so don’t worry too much about it,” she said, her face set in a reassuring smile the whole time.

Mia was not reassured. Panic began to set in, because flawed as she was, she still retained a sense of pride. Or maybe that just made her more flawed. In any case...

I-If I end up getting terrible grades... Well, Abel’s a good person so he’ll probably assume I wasn’t feeling well or something, but Sion... Oh, Sion is going to have a field day...

To be clear, the only thing on the line here was her ego. Heads weren’t going to roll, nor would she be thrown in a dungeon. Her mind sought refuge in those magic words that had served her so well—*It beats dying by guillotine...* It was her tried and true method for dealing with failure and embarrassment.

Mental respite, however, would not change the inevitable reality that after running the planned campaign focused on motivating students to improve their falling grades, the leader of the organizing body, the president of the student council herself, would have terrible grades. Well, even if they weren’t terrible, mediocre grades still wouldn’t do her reputation much good. And when the whole of the school learned of her performance...

I’ll be the laughingstock of the whole school! Sweet moons, I’ll die of humiliation!

Worse yet, it was customary for the student council president to deliver a speech before the summer break. She could offload the writing to someone else—Rafina, maybe—but she still had to read it herself. And she would have to do so shortly after having her terrible grades exposed to everyone present.

Th-The way they'll look at me... Oh merciful moons! And I thought the election speech was stressful. They'll skewer me with their gazes alone!

As it turns out, her guillotine-based assessment standards needed some work; a situation could be better than dying at the guillotine and still be utterly unbearable. It might not be as lethal, but she definitely didn't want to end up the object of everyone's ridicule. Furthermore, she'd be letting down a lot of people, among them a certain someone who'd willingly given up the president's seat and handed it to her in trust...

"Again, I have no doubt you'll be fine, Mia, but..." said Rafina with a terrifying smile.

This was, Mia realized, not about her ego anymore. She'd unwittingly wandered into the lion's den and was now at risk of waking the beast. One wrong move, and she'd step on its tail.

I-I'd better tread real carefully... she thought, as Rafina's face started to look uncomfortably leonine.

"O-Of course I'll be fine!"

She decided to bluff her way out for now and gave her fist a confident shake. The motion shook a few drops of cold sweat off her back.

"Lovely! I suppose that leaves Sapphias as the only remaining concern..."

Seeing that she was no longer the person of interest, Mia quickly muttered a goodbye and bounded out of the cafeteria, abandoning Sapphias's fate to Rafina's whims.

After returning to her room, Mia promptly reviewed the scope of the exams.

"Ugh... There's so much to study... Too much, actually! There's no way I can memorize all this!"

Now, this might come as a surprise, but when it came to taking exams, Mia's approach was not, in fact, to rely on hunches and pure luck. Crossing her fingers and hoping she guessed all the right answers was hardly a method that befit the princess of a mighty empire. As a proud member of Tearmoon royalty, her tactics were appropriately imperial—the equivalent of overwhelming foes through sheer numbers, otherwise known as...mass memorization! It was time for the indiscriminate commitment of material to memory! Important or not, if it was testable, it was going in the

memory bin. With her trusty cakes and cookies at her side, she'd fight on, wading through the ocean of knowledge until she remembered every last piece.

For everyone who's ever written an exam, it should be obvious that this wasn't going to work. And it never had. She'd used this method to prepare for plenty of exams in the previous timeline. Every time, she'd lose focus and slack off, leaving a bunch of important concepts unstudied, which always cost her dearly in terms of grades.

That said, it should be noted that she was doing much better in the current timeline. Thanks to Anne's support, her results during the last exam were actually within the top quarter of students. This time round, the problem was that she'd missed a lot of classes due to her trip back to Tearmoon.

"...I'm in for a hell of a time."

If she wanted to do well, she would have to memorize everything that could come up. The thought alone was enough to make her gulp in dread. She was, however, not the only one who was having a hell of a time. Beside her, her smaller roommate groaned in similar misery.

Bel had been glad that her enrollment in Saint-Noel went smoothly, but to her dismay, she quickly found herself scrambling to keep up with the pace and difficulty of her lessons.

"Hnnngh, something's not right. I'm pretty sure Mr. Ludwig taught me this before, so how come I can't remember anything? Ugh, it's not fair!"

...Does something sound familiar?

"Aaaaah, this is so hard! Grand— Miss Mia, isn't there some way to make this easier? Some sort of shortcut? Maybe a special studying technique? If I could just memorize all of this, I feel like I might manage..."

Mia regarded the teary-eyed Bel.

It's like looking in a mirror...

In a moment of clarity, her eyes grew distant and dispassionate as she regarded her sniveling granddaughter with a newfound objectivity. It was, she decided, a rather unseemly thing to be whining about.

"No, Bel, there is no shortcut. It's your own fault for not keeping up with your studies on a regular basis." Her words carried the weight of experience. "And now you must suffer the

consequences. We must all reap what we sow, Bel. Every last one of us."

Her eyes were somber, and her voice took on layers of sagely, subtle nuance, all of which seemed to have been lost on Bel.

"Hmph. Easy for you to say, *Grandma*, since you're the Great Sage of the Empire and everything, but just so you know, for people who are bad at it, studying is like torture."

"Of course I know that. But even so..." She grabbed her granddaughter's shoulder and squeezed, her hand shaking as if she were struggling to contain some powerful emotion. "There are times when we must, when we have no choice...but to stand. And to fight."

Then she tilted her head as a thought suddenly occurred to her.

"Hm? Wait..." She lifted an eyebrow at Bel. "What are you getting so upset about? No one's forcing you to ace the exam, and it's not like your grades are going to be posted for everyone to see..."

"I got a ten on my last test, and they told me if I don't improve my grades, I won't get to have summer break... They said it's the worst mark Saint-Noel has ever seen."

"Wh-Wha— How?!" Mia exclaimed, dumbfounded at Bel's confession. "T-Ten?! How in the moons did you get a *ten*?!"

For context, Saint-Noel's tests were generally marked out of a hundred, so...yeah. Even Mia had never reached such lows. Granted, she wasn't exactly a committed slacker either. She simply didn't have what it takes to sit back and snooze while everyone else was studying furiously to improve their grades. The same applied in class; she only ever half-listened, which by definition also meant she only ever half-not-listened. True delinquency took guts, and Mia's were in short supply. As a result, she'd never even come close to achieving the extraordinary feat of being able to count her score on a test with her fingers.

This girl must have nerves of steel. How is she not suffering a nervous breakdown with a mark like that? At this rate, they could probably post her mark for everyone to see and she'd just shrug it off.

She'd started to feel a growing sense of respect for Bel before she caught herself and hastily discarded the sentiment with a shake of her head.

No, failing a test epically is definitely a bad thing. Plus, I was the one who asked Rafina to enroll her. If she keeps this up, Rafina might

start giving me dirty looks.

More than anything else though, she couldn't help but worry about her granddaughter's future.

"This can't be allowed to go on. I'd better do something for her..."

So, she grabbed Bel and headed for the door. From personal experience, Mia knew that she had to get out of her room, or the sheer proximity of her bed and its ever-present allure would sap her of all motivation. Furthermore, her trusty maid was currently out working and unavailable to provide support. Without Anne's watchful eye, there was no way she'd get any studying done in her own room. When the chips were down and it was time to crunch, this was the one place she had to avoid at all costs.

"All right, let me teach you then. The trick is that you have to win through sheer numbers. Memorize *everything*, so you can deal with whatever they throw at you," she explained, proposing a strategy that was more or less the same as having no strategy at all as she led Bel toward the library. "Every so often, you recharge with some sweets, and then you keep going until you've covered everything that can come up on the test! That is the key to victory."

Mia's studying technique, you see, was just brute force, plain and simple.

"Hey, Mia. Here to do some studying?"

A voice called to her at the entrance to the library. She stopped and turned to identify the speaker.

"My, Abel! How have you been?" she said, brightening immediately. "I was actually hoping to help Bel do some studying. Are you here to prepare for the exams as well?"

For some reason, Abel hesitated and scratched his cheek sheepishly before answering.

"Uh... Well, I mean, I'll probably do that too, but...it was more for this."

He handed her a small stack of papyrus.

"Oh? What's this?"

"It's a summary of the material we covered in class. You've been gone for a while and, well...they taught some stuff that wasn't in the textbook, so I put this together. Not that I think you'll have any trouble catching up on your own, of course, but just in case..."

His cheeks began to fill with color, and he looked away, only to have his attention pulled back toward her when he felt her hands

close over his.

"Oh, Abel, you're so..." She looked up at him through her lashes, eyes moist with emotion. "Thank you. That was very thoughtful of you."

"Y-You don't have to thank me. It wasn't much. Besides, it's not like you'll need them—"

"No, I *do* have to thank you, Abel. Because I mean it. From the bottom of my heart..."

They shared a long, silent moment, each enraptured by the other's gaze. Bel, who'd been observing this whole interaction, decided it was an excellent opportunity to excuse herself.

"Well, I don't want to disturb, so I'll just go somewhere else..." she mumbled, the excuse directed at no one in particular.

She turned around and began to step slowly away from the two, only to let out a strangled croak when a hand promptly closed on the back of her collar.

She doesn't hesitate, does she? thought Mia as she hauled her granddaughter back.

Admittedly, there was something to be respected about Bel's decisiveness when it came to escaping. It reminded her of herself. Nevertheless, her grip on Bel's collar tightened. She needed Bel to stay here...for reasons not entirely related to making the girl study.

I can't have her running away on me. Otherwise. I'll...I'll be left here by myself with Abel!

Whereas the Mia of last year might have grinned at the thought of a private study session with Abel, present Mia dreaded the situation. Gone was the charming but callow youth whom she could tease. Granted, her past attempts at being the unflappable adult in their relationship had only met with moderate success, but it was the thought that counted. She at least went into each interaction feeling like the relative adult.

Now, thanks to all that sword practice he'd been doing with Sion, he was quickly maturing in both air and physique. His features were sharper and his muscles more toned. The thought of being alone with a burgeoning Prince Charming, as gentle as he was handsome... Well, the thought never got anywhere, as it tended to melt her brain in seconds. At best, she'd mumble something to the effect of *My, how odd... My chest feels tight...and my face is so hot...* before beginning to swoon.

In other words, she'd lost all Abel immunity and was now

terminally susceptible to his charm. Bel was her only hope of maintaining some semblance of composure, so she nabbed the girl as soon as she'd begun to flee.

"It's quite all right, Bel. You're not disturbing anyone. You can stay right here where I can see you and study with us."

Bel let out a sullen groan.

"Hnnnngh... You're so mean, Miss Mia. You're meaner than Mr. Ludwig."

Mia regarded her granddaughter and, for a brief, uncomfortable moment, saw herself in her pouty protests. She promptly put it out of her mind.

In any case, I can't afford to have Bel leave, or I'll be stuck here with Abel... Just the two of us... Which actually sounds quite wonderful but augh! My heart isn't ready! I-I think it's still a little early for us to be taking the next step in our relationship...

Whether or not the scenario she imagined could be classified as a "step" was debatable, but for Mia the romantic amateur, the prospect of sitting together in close proximity was simply too risqué.

With Bel in tow, Mia and Abel made their way into the library.

"Ah, Princess Mia."

Chloe, seated in a corner, waved at them. Mia waved back and walked over.

Phew. That makes four of us. The chances of being left alone with Abel are close to zero now.

She snuck a glance at Abel, who didn't seem particularly bothered by Chloe's presence. Without the slightest hint of disappointment, he'd returned the girl's greeting.

Hmph, you could have at least been a little *disappointed. Don't you want to spend some alone time with me?*

Do not mind the contradiction. After all, it is the nature of a young maiden's heart to be a pain— *intricate and nuanced*.

"What brings you here today?" asked a curious Chloe.

Mia recomposed herself and answered.

"We're here to do some studying."

"Oh, you are? So am I."

"Ah, what a coincid— Well, not really, I suppose." Considering it was exam season, it could hardly have been less of a coincidence. "May we join you?"

"Of course. Go right ahead."

Chloe shifted her seat to the side before giggling a little.

"Hm? What's the matter?" asked Mia.

"Oh, please excuse me. It's just... This is the first time I've ever studied together with friends like this."

"My, is that so? Are we disturbing you?"

"No, not at all! I'm glad, actually. It always seemed like a fun thing to do."

Just then, two more voices joined the party.

"Ah, good afternoon, Your Highness."

"Greetings... Your Highness..."

Mia looked up to find Tiona approaching. Beside her walked Liora Lulu.

"Good afternoon to you too, Tiona. And Liora as well. It's been a while since I've seen you. I recently paid a visit to your village, did you know?"

"You did? Wow... I had... No idea."

"Yes. The chieftain has gotten a lot better at speaking the imperial language. He seems to be getting along well with his grandson too."

Just as she was beginning to settle into a comfortable pace of casual banter, an alarm went off in her head.

Wait! I know where this is going! We'll just keep talking and talking and get no studying done!

She'd fallen into this trap plenty of times in the past with her entourage of girls. While the library was in principle a place for quiet study, one could hardly expect a gathering of young and like-minded friends to abstain from hushed chatter. Where there were rules, there was the irresistible thrill of skirting them—to test how far they could be bent—and Mia's group would be no different.

Hm, what should I do... She considered her options. Within a fraction of a second, she had her answer. *I know! I'll drag Sion into this too!*

Her solution: sabotage. If she couldn't get any studying done, then neither would Sion. Nor his attendant, for that matter. She had to drag in Keithwood to prevent him from helping Sion.

If everyone in the student council gets terrible grades, then Rafina won't be able to single me out!

In true Mia fashion, she immediately gave up trying to get any proper studying done. Instead, she focused on damage control

through the age-old method of spreading out blame.

"In which case, I should get a hold of Sapphias as well..."

He'd sworn to follow the banner of his princess, so if that banner fell, then he'd better fall with it. What was a pledge, after all, if not held through both life and death? And so, she proceeded to pull the rest of the student council onto the sinking ship that was her study group, because nothing says friendship like drowning together.

For the record, Mia came out of the exam ranked fifteenth in her grade—easily her best performance to date. This historical achievement owed a great deal to Abel's notes, whose efficient and accurate summaries of all the relevant content reflected the engrained diligence of his character. Equally vital was Anne, whose patented sleep-learning technique proved extremely effective in bolstering Mia's knowledge. It was the lowest mark in the student council, but it was more than good enough.

"H-How disappointing. I've been so busy and had to spend so much time away from school that I couldn't perform at my best," Mia said, trying very hard to keep her grimace from turning into a smug grin. "If only I had time to prepare properly. I should have been able to score higher. What a shame."

The awkward grin-grimace on her face ended up completely misleading Rafina, who regarded her twitching cheeks with concern.

"Gosh, you must really be disappointed..."

She went so far as to ask if Mia would like to retake the exam on a later date. Mia, unsurprisingly, declined the offer.

"No, that would be unfair. I'm not satisfied with my grades, but they're the ones that I got and therefore the ones that I deserve. I'll simply have to live with them."

Rafina held her gaze for a second before murmuring, "Such integrity... You're truly incredible, Mia..."

As for Bel... She averaged around forty—a valiant effort considering her previous performance, but still very definitely a failing mark. As a result, she ended up spending her summer break at school taking remedial courses...which she didn't actually mind all that much. Compared to life in a ruined capital, her time at Saint-Noel was like paradise.

“Why would I be upset? I get to stay in such a wonderful place. I even get to drink hot chocolate everyday,” she said with conviction when questioned about the matter. “Anyone who’s this lucky and still complains probably deserves to have something bad happen to them.”

Unmentioned was the fact that her grades had initially left her crestfallen. She’d been looking forward to spending her break with Mother Elise and was quite devastated to learn that she’d be stuck at summer school the whole time. It was Lynsha who, in a flash of brilliance, pointed out that staying at Saint-Noel would mean having access to all-you-can-drink hot chocolate every day, which immediately reversed Bel’s mood, thereby proving the old adage, like grandmother, like granddaughter.

Chapter 20: Esmeralda... Has a "Great" Idea!

The Clair de Lune—a tea party meant to facilitate fellowship between the houses of the Four Dukes of Tearmoon—was having a bit of an attendance crisis. In a scene that was growing increasingly common as of late, Esmeralda sat alone at a table sipping tea black as her mood while engaging in an angry dissection of the cake in front of her. Her frown deepened with every plunge of the fork.

"Huh. No Sapphias today again?" said Ruby, who strolled in with an insouciant smile. She glanced around the room. "And no Little Miss Yellowmoon either, though that's nothing new." She turned to Esmeralda. "So, did that cake murder your dog or something?"

That earned her a sullen glare.

"Hey, just joking around. So, what's making you so angry today?"

"Nothing. I'm not angry. Do I look angry? No, I don't." Esmeralda forced out a chuckle before taking another sip of tea. "Ugh, such terrible tea. I don't know where they got this from, but it's terrible... I need to get them to switch suppliers."

"Really? Smells fine to me," said Ruby with a knowing smile before sitting down in front of her. "Again, why so angry?"

"Hmph. That miscreant Sapphias is off at the library studying with Miss Mia. Can you believe it?" Esmeralda said, fuming.

"Well, it *is* exam season. And he's on the student council. You sure it's not one of their study sessions? Also, you still haven't answered my..."

Ruby trailed off and shook her head as she noticed that Esmeralda, absorbed in her own thoughts, clearly hadn't heard a word she'd said.

"What in the moons does he find so fascinating about that crowd? I can't for the life of me imagine why he'd want to associate with them... Some of them are commoners, for goodness sake! And

there's that *Rudolvon girl* too."

She spat out the last few words like bile and ground her teeth for a moment before continuing.

"Her Highness's partiality for commoners is downright maddening. And I really can't stand how Sapphias is just cozying up to her and playing along. Ugh, it drives me up the wall."

She tossed a few cubes of sugar into her tea and stirred it aggressively, spoon clinking loudly against the cup. It was altogether very unbecoming of a refined lady of the high nobility.

"On a different note," said Ruby, reaching for her own teacup as she changed the topic, "looks like your plan failed, didn't it?"

"...Plan? What plan? I have no idea what you speak of." Esmeralda lifted a puzzled eyebrow. Her facade of ignorance was impeccable.

"We all know the unspoken rule. What happens in the Clair de Lune stays in the Clair de Lune. Still..." Ruby gestured in concession. "I can see why you'd rather keep your lips sealed around a future political enemy."

"Perhaps the issue lies not with the security of my lips, but rather the lack of any need to part them," she said, pointedly keeping her lips closed as she gave a sweet smile. Then she added, "If anything, I thought you'd have made your move already. Didn't you say something about that last time?"

"Aha ha, turns out back room shenanigans just aren't my thing. I'm waiting for a chance to challenge Her Highness head-on. No dodgy stuff. Just me and her."

"Challenge? My, what a bold word. Very masculine. It almost makes me think you intend to best her in a duel."

"Crossing swords with Her Highness, huh... Wouldn't mind doing so, to be honest. Sounds fun."

The House of Redmoon had strong ties to the military, which influenced Ruby's upbringing. Having spent far more time on the training grounds than on the ballroom floor, her skill with the sword was formidable. Though she was no Sion, in a duel, the average male student stood no chance against her.

"But on second thought, I think I'll pass. Too stressful having to pull my punches the whole time. I don't want to hurt her by accident and end up sparking a war between my house and the Crown," she said with an irreverent grin. "Enough about me though. What about you, O Lady of Greenmoon? Don't tell me

you're raising the white flag after your one failed attempt to sabotage the academy city project."

"Excuse me? 'Sabotage'? Please, such barbarism is beneath me." She waved off the accusation with a haughty chuckle. "I will admit that allowing such an affront to go unchallenged would set a very poor precedent. Some degree of...*reprisal* is necessary..."

As Esmeralda sank into silent thought, Ruby leaned back and sighed.

"Again, don't stir things up too much, okay? If the House of Greenmoon turns itself into an enemy of His Majesty, we Redmoons will have no choice but to subjugate you."

"My, and how coldhearted of you to say so! Are we not fellow bearers of the Etoile?" Esmeralda asked with clearly feigned astonishment before letting out one of her signature *Oho hos*.

Ruby shot her a cock-browed look.

"Huh. Am I hearing this right? Because to me, Lady Esmeralda, that sounds like an offer of alliance. And you don't forge alliances without an enemy to oppose. Are you trying to drive a wedge through the empire? Cause civil war?"

"Civil war?" Esmeralda protested with a huff of outrage. "Language, Ruby, *language*. You people are such warmongers. I don't know what kind of barbaric ambitions you have, but please refrain from dragging the Greenmoons into them."

If Ruby took offense at this, her wry smile did not let it show.

"Say what you will, but we all know what's going on. I'll grant you one thing though. I *do* enjoy a good fight. That much is true. Having two halves of the empire's army go at it in a full-scale battle would be an epic sight to behold...but I'd rather it didn't happen right now. Fighting the Princess Guard would be...unpleasant. For personal reasons."

"Personal reasons, huh."

"Anyway, if you're going to do something, better do it fast. It's almost summer break. They say it's going to be a cool summer, but still, I assume you'd rather not have to do much work during the hottest time of the year."

"Ah, you're right. It's almost summer break, isn't it? How dreadful. Summer is such a miserable season. The heat is absolutely unbearable. I should go to the beach... Hm? Wait. Beach means the sea, and the sea means..." Her eyes suddenly glittered. "I just had the most wonderful idea. That's it! This is how I'll get to hang out

with— Ahem. Get to humiliate Miss Mia as recompense. Oho ho... I can barely wait! Now, as for which boat to use..."

Her devious grin elicited an exasperated eye-roll from Ruby.

"If you want to spend time with the princess so badly, why don't you just say so?"

"...Huh? A cruise?"

Mia blinked her widened eyes at the messenger standing at her door. The girl—Esmeralda's attendant—had brought a message that caught Mia completely off guard.

"Esmeralda's asking me to go on a cruise with her?"

"Yes. Milady heads out to the Galilea Sea every year during the summer. The waters are docile and easily navigated, while the numerous islands dotting the region are perfect as summer retreats. For further details, please see this letter of invitation."

Having delivered her message, the girl inclined her head respectfully and left. Mia regarded the letter in her hand with a wry smile.

"I'll admit, this is so very *her*..."

The invitation would have been infuriating if it wasn't so utterly brazen. The sheer nerve Esmeralda displayed, acting as if she hadn't just tried to sabotage the academy city project, was almost admirable. Mia found herself amused in spite of herself. Anne, however, wasn't so appreciative.

"Unbelievable! After all she did to get in our way, how can she act like nothing happened?" she exclaimed in a rare display of outrage.

Anne was a gentle creature. It wasn't easy to get her riled up, but Esmeralda's invitation evidently had been enough. Mia turned to her loyal maid and shook her head.

"This kind of thing happens all the time, Anne. It's not worth getting worked up about."

Esmeralda certainly wasn't going to admit to her sabotage attempt. Unless they could produce firm evidence, she'd doubtlessly feign ignorance. And act offended by the accusation while doing so. Playing dumb was practically a noble pastime, after all.

"But..."

"It's all right. We won't forget what she did, but it's not worth raising a fuss over now."

If anything, the letter she currently held was a far thornier

issue.

"We're going to say no to this invitation, right?"

"That...is a good question."

Mia considered the situation. Based on what she knew about Esmeralda's disposition from the previous timeline, this was probably part of some scheme.

But then again, it's also possible that she just wants to go out and have some fun. The odds, she figured, were about fifty-fifty. *Maybe this is her way of apologizing for what she did?*

Blindly going along with the plan would be foolish. Objectively speaking, so long as it was possible Esmeralda was trying to lure her into a trap, even if it was a silly one, there was no need to cooperate. The surest way of avoiding all risk was to simply say no. But...

If she actually just wants to do something fun, or if this is supposed to be an apology, then turning her down would be a little awkward.

Mia knew Esmeralda to be a capricious girl. One day, she could be scheming someone's downfall, and the next, she could be asking them to a party as if her prior actions had just slipped her mind. What bothered Mia right now, however, was not the ephemeral threads of Esmeralda's fancy, but something a lot closer to home—specifically, something that involved Mia herself.

That passage in the Princess Mia Chronicles... I wonder...

She distinctly remembered the text mentioning how she'd beat a gigantic man-eating fish into submission. Obviously, she didn't put much stock in this little anecdote. It was likely the result of extreme exaggeration, in which layer after layer of hyperbole left the story so removed from reality that it might as well be complete fantasy.

Even I'm not crazy enough to believe I can beat down a monster like that...but it seems reasonable to assume that there will come a time when I have to swim...

Assuming the episode described in the book was based on a factual event, its context strongly hinted at the occurrence of a preceding event—Mia falling into the sea.

If so, I'd better learn to swim beforehand...

As you all know, Mia loved to bathe but could not swim. Had she been able to, she'd have already earned herself a good scolding from Rafina for swimming up and down the big bathing pool in Saint-Noel...which would have left a deep scar of psychological

trauma in her, making it so she could never enjoy a bath ever again. Turns out, swimming like a brick sometimes had its advantages.

She was, however, in good company; Tearmoon was an inland empire, and swimming was not part of its culture. If dropped into the sea, few nobles would be able to manage much more than a clumsy dog paddle. Esmeralda was the exception. The ample time she'd spent at the beach growing up contributed a great deal to her understanding of the dynamics of moving about in water.

She'd always go on and on about how the body floats better in the sea, and how the water's salty... I never really figured out what she was talking about.

Regardless, it suggested Esmeralda knew how to swim. Given the opportunity to learn from a pro, was it truly wise for Mia to pass it up? It might be the only chance she'd ever get. After much arm-crossing and brow-furrowing, she arrived at a conclusion.

Right. I don't know what the trap is, but considering Esmeralda's the one who came up with it, it can't be that bad. Honestly, now that I think about it, she hardly seems like the Serpenty type...

And so, Mia decided to trust in Esmeralda. Specifically, she trusted in the amount of air in Esmeralda's head. All that buoyancy must come from somewhere, after all, and she seemed to float better than Sapphias, so...

I know an airhead when I see one. And I'm seeing one. I think I'll be fine.

Mia was quite the astute observer when it came to cephalic gaseousness. Well, that of other people, anyway.

As a precaution, the following day, Mia informed the student council of her plans for the summer. What she didn't expect...was for this decision to set into motion a number of events that would ultimately lead to an absolutely unforgettable summer!

Chapter 21: Foreshadowing through Companion Choice...

"You're going on a summer cruise? With the daughter of Duke Greenmoon?"

Upon learning of this, the rest of the student council exchanged worried glances.

"Are you sure you'll be okay, Mia?" asked Abel, a crease forming across his brow. "Wasn't one of the Four Dukes in touch with, you know..."

Mia smiled.

"I'm aware, yes. I'm quite sure I'll be fine though. Esmeralda is no conspirator. It's not how she works."

"But the risk still stands, Your Highness. This is much too reckless," said Sapphias, joining the protest. "The most innocent of appearances can hide the most devilish of intents, and Esmeralda is no exception! She might act friendly to your face, but by the moons, she could easily be plotting against you the whole time."

The inherent irony of his statement—it could and did apply to himself—was lost on him. It was not lost on Rafina, who favored him with the kind of benign smile a mother might show one of her slower-witted children. Mia caught the expression and, for all its warmth, still shuddered in fear. It was as if she'd developed some sort of spinal reflex that sent chills up her back no matter what Rafina did.

"If you're so worried, Sapphias, why don't you join us on the cruise?" asked Mia, figuring it'd be a good way to alleviate his concerns. As a fellow Etoiler, he was certainly qualified to participate.

"Eh? Join you? Well... I'd love to, Your Highness. I mean, as your loyal vassal, you could even argue that it's my duty to accompany you on such journeys, but my fiancée and I need some quali— Erm, have made plans to be elsewhere."

He hastily declined her offer. For Sapphias, the princess's safety

was a grave matter. Spending time with his fiancée was just a graver one.

Hm... I see what his priorities are. In a way, he kind of reminds me of Father...

His single-minded infatuation with the person he loved... The way he prioritized a single woman above all else... His unwavering fixation... They were all qualities present in the Emperor.

Well, I suppose it's nice for his future wife to know that she'll never be cheated on... But if they ever have a daughter... Oh, she's going to hate him so much... Poor thing...

She imagined a future Sapphias, curled up despondently in a corner after his daughter called him an annoying old fart, and felt profound pity for the man.

"Hm? What? Why are you looking at me like that?"

"It's nothing. Don't worry about it."

It occurred to her that even if he were to come with her, he probably wouldn't be of much use anyway.

He's not exactly bodyguard material... she thought, feeling a little sorry for him as she regarded him.

Sapphias looked from Mia to Rafina, then back, shuffling uncomfortably under the double dose of their baffling gazes. It wasn't long before he claimed to have remembered an urgent matter that needed his attention and slunk out of the room.

"He seems a rather busy fellow, that Sapphias. Anyway, I'll be bringing some of my guard with me as well. I do think it'll be fine."

Despite Mia's insistence, Abel's frown did not subside. He leaned toward Sion and whispered in his ear.

"...Hey, can I ask you something?"

"Hm? Sure."

They conversed softly for a bit before rising from their seats.

"Excuse me? Is there something you two would like to share with us?" asked Mia, who'd been growing increasingly suspicious of the pair's hushed dialogue.

"Oh, no. Don't worry about us," said Abel, holding his palms out as he backed away. "You keep doing your thing."

"All right, but..."

Before she could question them further, the two of them stepped out of the room.

When they came back in, Abel immediately walked over.

“Mia, I have a request for you.”

“What is it?” she asked, tilting her head quizzically at the solemn expression he wore.

“The Kingdoms of Remno and Sunkland would each like to dispatch a retinue of guards for this occasion.”

“My! To accompany me?”

Sion, looking every bit as serious as Abel, nodded in response.

“I know you insist it’s safe, but she’s a Greenmoon. After their recent meddling, I find myself hard pressed to trust them unreservedly. We’ll select the exact personnel later, but we’d like to have your approval first.”

She regarded the two boys, her lips puckered in thought.

Who might Sion send? He’d have to really trust them to guard me, so probably people like Keithwood. As for Abel… Hm, I’m not sure. I doubt he’d send that fellow with the spear. Maybe some people from that Diamond Legion I keep hearing so much about? I wouldn’t mind that, actually. Sounds sort of interesting. She folded her arms. *It’s definitely true that having Keithwood come along would offer some peace of mind. Plus, he’s got a pretty face, so Esmeralda will certainly approve. I honestly don’t know about Remno though…*

Her lengthy deliberation was not without cause; the issue of her escort wasn’t as simple as it seemed. Obviously, she hadn’t intended to show up all by herself. With that said, bringing along a small battalion of guards for what was meant to be a fun summer diversion on the open sea would be more than a little awkward. Meddling or not, Esmeralda was a proud Greenmoon and had to be afforded the respect due a house of the Four Dukes. As the organizer, she would doubtlessly provide a suitable escort for her guests. Were Mia to then bring an excessive number of her own guards, it would be taken as an affront—a distrust of Greenmoon’s competence, or even loyalty. Therefore, she couldn’t bring more than one or two people.

It’d be best to have someone like Vanos come along, but he’s probably a little too thuggish for Esmeralda, appearance-wise. Which means…

On paper, Dion was the perfect candidate; he had both the looks and the skills. His only disqualifying attribute was Mia’s personal veto.

Having him *come with me? I’d rather not turn the cruise into a waking nightmare, thank you very much.*

If she ever fell into the sea, he'd probably just watch her drown out of amusement.

The problem is, if I rule out those two, I'm not sure there's anyone else I trust enough when it comes to knowing their way around a sword.

A cute face wasn't much use in a fight. Well, unless it stuck itself between her and an oncoming blade, but that also wasn't the kind of thing she wanted on her conscience. It'd make for bad dreams down the road.

This was why the suggestion from the two princes was actually quite welcome. She would have had trouble selecting appropriate personnel from her own pool of talent. Keithwood, in particular, was someone she very much looked forward to recruiting. When it came to explaining the appearance of extra travelers, she could simply claim it was Sion and Abel being thoughtful. That probably —no, definitely—would be good enough. After all, Esmeralda had a thing for handsome boys.

Mia thoughtfully examined Keithwood's face.

"Uh... Can I help you, Princess Mia?"

"Oh, no. Not yet, anyway. Don't worry about it."

She turned away, the motion hiding a satisfied grin.

You're welcome, Esmeralda!

The two princes excused themselves soon after, claiming to have some matters they needed to handle. Keithwood naturally followed them out as well, leaving only girls in the room. That was when Rafina said in a measured tone, "By the way, Mia, I was thinking..."

Chapter 22: Princess Mia… Experiences F.A.T.

“If you’re going on a cruise, you’ll need to bring a swimsuit, won’t you?” Rafina asked after the boys left.

“Hm? A swimsuit, you say?”

Mia scratched her head. The term was foreign to her.

“Yes. It’s clothing designed for swimming. I assume you’ll want to change out of your regular clothes. Trying to swim in this,” she said, plucking up the hem of her uniform for emphasis, “would make for a very unpleasant experience.”

“That’s true. I do remember it being very difficult,” agreed Mia as she recalled the times she’d almost drowned. There was when she’d fallen into the lake…and when she’d fallen into the river… She shivered. “Yes, I do think some new clothing is in order. Hm…”

She probably wouldn’t have much luck finding clothes designed for swimming in Tearmoon…

“Would you happen to know any tailors who specialize in such clothing, Miss Rafina?”

“Well… I sometimes go on excursions out to Noelige Lake, and I had a swimsuit made for those occasions. Perhaps I can introduce you to that store…” she said as she chewed on her lips. “Yes, I think the tailor there will do. It’s important to choose the store carefully, you see, because the designs vary, and I’ve heard some of them can be terribly indecent.”

“I-Indecent?”

Mia’s eyes widened.

“Yes. Apparently, some of them…” Rafina motioned around her abdomen. “Leave this area completely bare.”

“My! All that?! How terribly indecent indeed!”

Mia’s hands instinctively rubbed at her tummy, feeling the comforting sensation of fabric over her flesh. The fabric was…tighter than she’d expected. A lot more.

“Unbelievable! Such immodesty, baring their bellies! That kind

of behavior shouldn't be allowed!" she exclaimed in outrage.

Rafina nodded firmly in agreement.

"Some amount of exposure is certainly unavoidable given the nature of swimming, but baring an excessive amount of skin impinges on the moral fiber of our society. We'll need to carefully ascertain the design beforehand..."

"I couldn't agree more. Hmph, baring my belly... Absolutely unthinkable! Why would I ever wear clothes like that?"

"Right? Oh, I'm so glad you understand, Mia!"

To the others in the room, the conversation must have sounded like two girls sharing a moment of mutual understanding. The two conversers themselves likely thought so as well. However, unbeknownst to all those present was the existence of a fundamental discrepancy in their outrage. One was moral in nature, criticizing society and its tendencies. The other was a lot more pragmatic, involving a rather inconvenient phenomenon of metabolism. Regardless, their dialogue continued.

"Now that I know we're on the same page," said Rafina, "I'll contact the tailor for us. I've been meaning to order a new one for myself as well... Oh, what about everyone else? We can all do this together if you'd like."

Thus was it decided that the girls of the student council would all have swimsuits made for themselves.

Rafina's tailor of choice arrived three days later.

"I'm honored by your patronage. Now then, let's begin."

She was a lady with a terse manner and a scrutinizing gaze who wasted no time getting to work. Instead of taking detailed measurements, she started by having the girls try some swimsuits on.

"Sizes can be adjusted later. First, I'd like confirmation regarding the designs. I've received instruction from Lady Rafina to keep the amount of bared skin to a minimum, so if you could take a look at these..."

She laid out a number of swimsuits across a table. In terms of design, they resembled the dress Mia had worn to the evening ball, but the skirt was shorter and underneath it was what looked like shorts that reached halfway down the thighs.

"Let's see... I believe this one may be more suitable for Princess Mia's smaller frame," said the tailor as she produced a pair of pants.

“These would be worn next to the skin, by themselves.”

“Ah, you mean like undergarments?”

“The comparison is apt. As for the size... The tighter the fit, the easier it is to swim. To ensure its function, I’ve designed it to feel slightly constricting.”

Mia nodded at the explanation as she tried to put them on.

She...isn’t kidding. Honestly, I feel like this is more than “slightly” constricting. It’s as tight as a corset. I wonder if they’re all like this? she thought as she struggled to pull the thing over her hips.

Just then, she heard the tailor utter “Huh!” in a surprised tone.

“...Hm?” She glanced at the lady. “Is something the matter?”

“Oh, no, no, don’t mind me. Nothing is the matter. Hm, hm... I see, I see. That certainly would make it feel rather tight... Well then...”

The tailor began speaking in a nervous mumble. Mia eyed her for a while before nodding in comprehension.

Aha. This lady’s probably a good designer considering she’s got Rafina’s seal of approval, but she doesn’t seem to be very good at gauging sizes, does she?

The tailor’s next statement, however, gave her pause.

“Does everyone else’s fit fine? Yes? So only the princess needs a slightly larger size. Hm, hm, all right...”

Mia frowned, puzzled by the statement until she noticed the look of sheer devastation on Anne’s face.

“That reminds me,” the maid mumbled to herself, “some of the dresses did seem a little tight lately. No, but milady is still growing, so there’s always the possibility that it’s not...”

Upon hearing the distress in Anne’s voice, Mia’s affect flattened. She placed her hands on her tummy and pinched. A generous wad of flesh rose up in her fingers.

“...Anne, I’d like to hear your honest opinion. Am I...fat?”

“N-No, of course not... Milady is...growing! Yes, you’re still growing! S-So of course your body would become bigger...”

“Hm, I am indeed aware that I’m still growing. However, if the horizontal rate of this growth outpaces the vertical, would that not imply my gains are primarily in weight rather than height?”

She fixed her maid with a steady gaze and repeated herself.

“You are my loyal subject, Anne. I trust that you will not lie to me. So, I will ask one more time. Tell me truthfully. Am I...fat?”

Anne looked away, unable to meet her gaze, and conceded.

“Maybe...a little. Just a little. But that’s probably because of all those cakes and sweets you’ve been having lately. I was worried it might have been a bit too much...”

She’d known the truth. After all, she’d been the one to ask. But hearing it acknowledged by her faithful maid still robbed her of breath. She let out a short gasp, feeling the weight of irrefutable, objective reality as it sunk into her consciousness—both figuratively and literally. Scenes from the recent past flashed through her mind’s eye. She saw herself climbing onto a horse and remembered how the beast seemed to tense as she mounted. She saw herself rolling across her bed and recalled the creaking of strained wood sounding louder than before.

More and more memories flooded her mind, all pointing toward a single, dreadful fact. She cupped her cheeks. They felt too round. She tapped at her tummy. It seemed to jiggle. That was it. The evidence was clear, and there was no denying it. She suffered from food-induced annular turgidity. Her body was demonstrating focally abdominal tumefaction. In other words, she was experiencing the phenomenon known as F.A.T.

“Princess Mia, um...” said a worried Chloe. “It says in books that you can lose weight by exercising.”

She examined Chloe, who’d slipped into the swimsuit the tailor gave her without any trouble. It fit her like a glove. Mia scowled, feeling profoundly betrayed, before her indignation gave way to despondency.

“Well then... I guess that’s just how the cookie crumbles... Now that I think about it, I have been slacking off on my dance practice. That probably didn’t help...”

An anxious Chloe offered stammered words of comfort, but Mia waved her off.

“It’s all right. I know. I’ll do some more horseback riding and try a little harder during dance practice.”

“That is a most commendable attitude, princess. Keep at it, and you will surely see results.” The tailor approved, speaking in the somewhat arrogant tone of a teacher instructing a struggling student. “Though unrelated to the business of swimsuits, I should also mention that your upper arms are displaying a degree of pudginess. It is not too late, however, to reverse this trend. Even a small increase in exercise frequency may prove to be enough. Riding will also aid in toning up your legs and rear, so it is good

that you are including it in your regimen."

Arrogant tone aside, the tailor's words carried a certain authority of experience that Mia found comforting. She felt her motivation returning, knowing that her current activities were already on the right track and required only minor modifications.

"All right. I'll do this. Once I get back to the empire, I'll go riding every day. Dancing too... Anyway, I'll make sure it gets done!"

In the end, Mia opted to have her swimsuit made with the current specifications, trusting herself to make the necessary modifications to the body that would eventually inhabit it. The clock was now ticking, and the race was on. Would she be able to slim down enough to wear her swimsuit? Only time would tell!

Side Chapter: When a Small Prayer Reaches the Heavens

"I hope...that one day, the world will be free of such misery..."

A young girl looked up at the empty sky, willing her quiet prayer toward the invisible ears of heaven. Her dress, regally crafted to befit the attire of a princess, was marred with mud. Before her lay the emaciated body of a little boy whose arm, moments before, had been outstretched. She'd wanted to answer his plea. To take his trembling hand in hers and offer...something, if not help then at least words of comfort. But she couldn't. By the time she'd knelt beside him, he was gone.

That scene, like many others she witnessed visiting famine-stricken villages, had stuck with her—an ache in her heart that time could not allay. So, she prayed, again and again, each time more earnestly than the last. But the ears of heaven seemed deaf to her pleas, and its celestial whims inscrutable and cruel. Famine continued to befall her country, striking without rhyme or reason, as if her land and people were but playthings for a sadistic and mercurial deity. In time, she began to wonder. Were her prayers even reaching God? And if they were, did he, sitting in his lofty throne, even care?

So be it. If God wouldn't do anything, then she would. If he saw fit to leave them to their fate, then she would take it upon herself to rid them of their misery. The young girl gave herself to her cause. She allowed it to consume her, offering her every waking moment to the enrichment of her country and the feeding of her people. But in the rush of hard work and struggle, she left something behind. It had slipped out of her, like a coin from a pocket, unseen and unremembered. She forgot her wish. She abandoned her prayer.

It was customary for Perujin princesses to return to their homeland before the summer break. This was so they could stand with their people and lead the harvest. Furthermore, during the

harvest festival, they performed rites at shrines, serving as maidens who thanked the heavens for a bountiful season and prayed for continued fortune in the subsequent year. These duties were recognized by the Central Orthodox Church to be part of their official function, so they were permitted by Saint-Noel Academy to leave early.

This did, of course, prevent them from participating in pre-summer events such as the swordsmanship tournament, but for Arshia Tafrif Perujin, never once did she mourn the loss. Perujin's fate was inextricably tied to the quality of its harvests. Poor yields would cost countless lives and could even lead to the collapse of the nation. Therefore, praying for good harvests was a duty that Arshia considered paramount. School functions were trivial in comparison.

The first time her sureness in her priorities wavered was the year she turned fifteen. Specifically, it happened the day she came across a field of study known as botany. Its focus on plants piqued her interest. So, taking advantage of the wealth of information that Saint-Noel offered, she delved into the subject. What she discovered shook her to her core. Knowledge, she realized, was instrumental in determining the quality of a harvest. Knowledge accrued through the tireless efforts of her own people. Knowledge that she, their princess, did not possess.

A deep shame had filled her heart. At the same time, she felt that she'd found her calling: immerse herself in the field of botany, absorb its knowledge, and apply it toward the improvement of Perujin produce. She was going to rid her country of famine and bring prosperity to her impoverished people.

From that day forward, she devoted herself to her studies. Her efforts were rewarded, and it wasn't long before her expertise rivaled that of her teachers. With her newfound knowledge, she would enrich her homeland. She could grow more resistant wheat. Improve farming efficiency. Reform agriculture from the ground up. On the day of her graduation, she could barely contain herself. She was full of emotions—excitement, anticipation, and most of all, hope. Buzzing with energy and motivation, she returned home...to the dissonant edict of her father, the King.

"Prepare yourself for marriage. There are many promising candidates among the foreign nobility. It is time you wed one of them."

Arshia protested, of course. She was a researcher. She had

expertise. She wanted to help her country through her skills and knowledge. Didn't they understand?

They did not. From her mother, she received admonishment. From her older sister, subtle reproof. No matter where she turned, her wishes were ignored. Day after day, she weathered their disapproval. And so, weathered she became, her passion doused by the unending drizzle of opposition. She began doubting the virtue of her cause. Perhaps, she reasoned, they were right, and what she was trying to do was little more than a vain attempt to satisfy her own ego, like the seeding of salted earth. The only person who stood by her was her younger sister, Rania, who'd remained firmly supportive of her studies. And as she began to sink into the mire of despair, it was her little sister who grabbed her hand.

"Hey Arshia, you know how they're building a new academy city in the Tearmoon Empire? Do you want to try being a teacher there?"

Barely a day after Rania's return from Saint-Noel, she approached Arshia with a proposal. Taken completely by surprise, Arshia blinked in confusion.

"Huh? What are you talking about?"

After learning the details, she nodded in understanding. Rania had, in the course of her studies, apparently acquainted herself with Princess Mia of Tearmoon. According to her, Mia held Arshia's expertise in very high regard. It was a nice thought, even though it seemed blatantly obvious that Rania had forcibly wrung the idea out of the Tearmoon Princess in an attempt to help Arshia escape her current circumstances.

"As a princess, you'll be able to make all sorts of connections teaching at Princess Mia's academy," urged Rania. "Way more than if you were married off to some random noble. It'd strengthen ties between Perujin and Tearmoon. Also—"

"Thank you, Rania. But no. I can't."

Arshia interrupted her younger sister with a glum shake of the head.

"...Wh-What?" asked a slack-jawed Rania. She hadn't expected Arshia to turn down the offer. "How come?"

"Do you really need to ask? After being humiliated like that, do you seriously expect me to go work for the Princess of Tearmoon?"

Back when Arshia had organized Perujin's produce showcase party, the Tearmoon nobles in attendance had made no attempt to

hide their contempt. She could still remember their scornful remarks. *Crops as paltry as their country. Food fit for cattle.* They'd taken the literal fruits of Perujin farmers' labor and thrown them on the ground. Even now, the memory still made her seethe with anger.

"She might be your friend, Rania, but she's not mine. I have no reason to help her, and I don't want to either. Please kindly inform *Her Highness* that I have no intention of accepting her offer."

Rania's letter arrived in Mia's hands two days later. After trekking all the way to Viscount Berman's domain and successfully recruiting Ludwig's former master, the wise old Galv, Mia had been looking forward to some well-earned rest and recuperation back at the capital.

"They did *what*?! For the love of— What in the moons did those idiots think they were doing?! Augh! I can't— Just— Augh!"

She threw aside Rania's letter, planted her face in her bed and kicked while holding her head. Then, still unsatisfied, she propped up her pillow and started punching it. Only after thoroughly thrashing her bedding had she vented enough frustration to think straight again.

"Let's see... Given the circumstances, I think the first thing I should do is issue a formal apology."

Mia had no qualms about saying sorry. She'd say it as many times as necessary. Words were cheap, after all, and Mia liked cheap things. It was, in her opinion, better to say sorry than be sorry. Not that she had any shortage of things to be sorry for, but anyway...

She quickly penned an apology and sent it off to Perujin on the fastest horse she could find. Unfortunately, the problem proved too stubborn to be solved by a single letter.

"Well, that figures, I suppose..." she said with a sigh after reading Rania's response.

The message relayed Arshia's stance, which could be summed up as, "It's fine. I don't need you to apologize. Now go away." Needless to say, no progress was made. Words were indeed cheap; a brief apology wasn't going to pay off a years-old debt.

"Like I thought, the apology has to be earnest...and it has to come from the people who committed the offense in the first place."

With that in mind, Mia concocted a plan. Basically, she was

going to round up the knuckleheads who'd made fun of Arshia during her party, make them acknowledge the quality of Perujin produce, and then have them admit to their profoundly poor judgment in a formal apology.

"Tons of things grown in Perujin taste really good too. It can't be that hard to cook up some impressive dishes...but then again, those nitwits don't seem like the kind of people to appreciate good cooking."

Many nobles in Tearmoon were predisposed to harboring an irrational hatred toward agriculture, which tended to foster a disdain for produce as well. As a result, even if the food was so delicious it moved them to tears, they'd claim to be crying from sheer disgust. Wrangling an honest compliment out of them was going to be like pulling teeth, and reaching into their metaphorical mouth cavity seemed highly unappealing. She needed a plan.

"If they're not going to voluntarily say good things about the produce, then I"ll just have to put them in a situation where they have no other choice."

Delicious crops alone weren't enough to earn their praise... But what if she appended an adjective? What if they were delicious grown-in-Tearmoon crops?

"Or even better... 'Delicious Tearmoon produce sourced from the humble country of Perujin.' What if I go with that?"

The ones who'd made fun of Arshia were members of the empire's central nobility. They were walking, talking bundles of Tearmoon pride. These were people who derived immense pleasure from boasting about their own nation while debasing others.

Which makes them terribly easy to manipulate. Oh, they'll be dancing in the palm of my hand before they know it!

She grinned like a mastermind who'd just devised a devious plan. Note the simile, *like* a mastermind. Because she definitely wasn't one. Regardless, she was now a woman with a plan, and she promptly began putting it into action. First, she would arrange a tea party with invitations for both Arshia and the young nobles who'd mocked her. Then she'd have all the food for the party made from Perujin produce—without her guests' knowledge, of course.

Finally, she'd casually mention something to the effect of, "My, the vegetables used in these dishes are simply exquisite!" Upon hearing her say that, the nobles would look from her to Arshia, and draw the conclusion, "Aha! So Her Highness is saying that

Tearmoon produce is superior to that of Perujin!" It would be the wrong conclusion, of course, but that was the point.

"Considering they're the kind of people who badmouthed Perujin products *at a party hosted by Perujin*, that's definitely what they'll think. And they'll follow my lead and start praising the dishes as well. That's when I'll spring my trap and leave them speechless. To that end, I'll have to host this tea party somewhere in Tearmoon..."

The nobility had a very low opinion of agriculture in general, but that didn't mean they couldn't speak positively about it in relative terms. If they thought they were comparing Perujin produce to Tearmoon produce, they'd be tripping over each other to lavish praise on their empire. Then, by revealing that everything they'd eaten was actually grown in Perujin, she'd leave them no choice but to apologize to Arshia.

"What would be the best place to do this... Maybe at the Rudolvon's?"

The Outcount was also a frequent target of their animosity, but he was nevertheless a Tearmoon noble. Unlike Perujin, which they saw as practically a vassal state, they'd still acknowledge the Rudolvons as one of their own, albeit grudgingly. Highlighting the ingredients used in the food they were enjoying would surely lead them to assume the ingredients were sourced locally. Another advantage was the Rudolvons' proximity to both Perujin and the site of the future Saint Mia Academy. Once she was done with the tea party, she could even ask them to tour the school. The location was perfect.

"To be honest, I'm not exactly looking forward to asking *him* for help," she muttered, recalling her last interaction with Outcount Rudolvon.

Regardless, it had to be done, and on second thought, all she really had to do was talk him into going along with her plan. If saying nice things could solve her problem, she'd say them all day. *Words* were cheap.

"What else is there... Maybe for some extra flair, I'll bring along some of the kids enrolling in my school. That might up the impact," she murmured, contemplating the details of her plan with enough meticulousness to almost turn her from a pretend mastermind to a real one.

It occurred to her that even if the nobles apologized, there was

no guarantee that Arshia would agree to teach at the school. Therefore, she had to create a situation in which it was hard for Arshia to say no. The plan was simple: have her meet her future pupils in person.

"I'm definitely bringing Cyril. He's got that smart kid look to him that teachers love. He'll probably want to ask lots of questions, so I'll sic him on her and tickle her inner educator."

She'd allow him free reign over his choice of questions. Not because she was generous or anything, but because she knew next to nothing about the subject matter. As a devout observer of the Mia Method—when in doubt, delegate, delegate, delegate—she was determined to let everyone else deal with the actual *knowing* of stuff.

"Wagul too. He's such a nice boy. I bet she'll take a liking to him. Who else... Oh, there's that girl from the orphanage. Selia, I think? I'll bring her too."

In bringing the two children, she was mostly hoping to use their unfortunate circumstances to earn some pity points. Princess Arshia probably didn't view Tearmoon nobles in a good light, so showing up with a small army of their kids wasn't going to make a good impression. It'd be better for Mia to mix in some kids of common blood, thereby demonstrating her willingness to excavate talent from even the lowest strata of society. Perujin royalty reportedly maintained a close relationship with their people. The presence of the orphans would doubtlessly make it harder for Arshia to refuse her request.

Mia wasn't fond of taking risks. Driven by her inner voice, which was mostly just a bunch of chicken sounds, she steadily and unwittingly adopted the approach of true strategists, who strove to win as much of the battle as possible before any of the fighting even began. After making every possible preparation to increase her advantage, she sent out the invitations and hosted the tea party.

"Please accept my warmest welcome, Princess Arshia Tafrif Perujin, as well as my deepest gratitude for taking the time to come here. I know you're very busy with the harvest festival."

Arshia regarded the brightly smiling Mia, feeling a growing pang of regret at her decision to come. After declining the offer to teach, she hadn't had the nerve to turn down the ensuing invitation to tea, but that didn't mean she was glad to be here.

“Your Highness is most generous with your words. It is an honor to be invited to this occasion,” she replied before glancing at the other guests.

Gathered at Mia’s party were the exact same people who’d mocked her during her own. They even wore the same sneers. It was as if she’d been transported back to that terrible day.

Is this payback? For turning down her job offer? But if Rania is to be believed, Princess Mia isn’t that kind of person, in which case... Maybe it’s the opposite? Is she going to order them to apologize?

She sighed. After all this time, what was the point? Even if they apologized, it wouldn’t change her mind. She had no intention of working for Mia. As the party began in earnest, she was consumed by a profound sense of weariness. The more she observed, the less she cared. It was all so blatant. So staged. All of the food they were being served was made with fruits and vegetables grown in Perujin. It’d taken her no more than a single bite to realize this. She looked to Mia, who was showering the food with profuse praise. Well, when she wasn’t busy stuffing her face with the stuff, anyway. Her behavior was so comically excessive, like visual hyperbole, that it made Arshia cringe.

Ugh, such blatant flattery. It’s so obvious that she’s putting on an act. I mean, it’s a pretty thorough act, but still...

After every bite, Mia seemed to revel in the moment, radiating so much bliss she practically glowed. Arshia watched her with a quirked brow, unsure if she was supposed to be offended or impressed by the display.

“This cake is simply exquisite! The fruits in it, they’re just... *Mwah!*” Mia exclaimed, making a kissing motion with her hand.

“I agree wholeheartedly.” One of the young nobles chimed in casually. “The empire’s fruits are superb. Nothing like that grub we get from a certain agricultural country I could mention...”

A grin spread across Mia’s lips.

“My, how strange of you to say that...considering all the agricultural products used to make the food you see here were grown in Perujin.”

Ah, so that’s the script they’re following. After being told that the produce they spoke so highly of is actually grown in Perujin, they’ll come to me and apologize.

Arshia observed the theatrics with mild exasperation. Presumably, these nobles were under direct orders from Mia to

participate in this clumsy farce and deliver an apology at the end.

This is so stupid. If I'm right about her plan, then Rania seriously needs to have some higher standards for her friends, because this Princess Mia person really isn't much to write home about.

Of course, she'd have to accept the apology. After they'd made a whole show of it, she could hardly refuse. She might even end up having to accept her original job offer as well. A request from the Princess of Tearmoon was not something she could turn down without due reason, and it'd take them little more than this half-baked travesty of an apology to rob her of it.

They can do as they please... Bully us to their liking... And it's all because we're poor, and our country is weak...

She watched them with a scowl as her spirits sank into the gloomy morass of her own bitter musings...only for the proceedings to defy her expectations. Upon being told that the food on which they'd lavished so much praise was actually of Perujin origin, the young nobles proceeded to...pivot.

"Ah, my mistake. It is our chefs then who deserve praise for turning third-rate fruits from Perujin into such fine cake. The empire's expertise is unmatched."

"I see," commented another noble. "In other words, the food on display today was a challenge to see how much flavor could be extracted from inferior ingredients. Most impressive."

This seemed to catch Mia off guard, and she uttered only a dumbfounded "Huh?" as she stared wide-eyed at the speakers.

Contempt entered Arshia's gaze as she glared at the nobles, appalled by their contorted reasoning.

Ugh, these people are hopeless...

Even now, they refused to admit their mistake. Was it that hard for them to say sorry? Arshia shook her head. She could see right through their foolish vanity, and it disgusted her. There was, however, someone she couldn't see through, and that bothered her. She turned toward Mia.

What's the deal with her? If she wants them to apologize, she just has to say so. She's their princess, for crying out loud... Why didn't she just order them to do it?

For all its insincerity, the apology itself should still be warranted. Did she forget to tell the nobles what to do? Surely, she hadn't expected them to apologize on their own? For someone called the Great Sage of the Empire, it would be ludicrously

embarrassing for her to have lacked the foresight to *give basic instructions...*

"U-Um... Princess Arshia?"

That was when she heard an unfamiliar voice. A young boy approached her. He looked to be a little younger than Rania. Beside him stood a girl and another boy, both approximately the same age. The trio was much younger than the other guests, and Arshia had noticed them as soon as she'd arrived. She'd been wondering what they were doing here.

"Yes? Can I help you, uh..."

She smiled at the boy as she considered him. Assuming this tea party was staged for the purpose of delivering an apology, what was the purpose of these children? Her thoughts must have leaked into her expression, for the young boy nodded and introduced himself as Cyril Rudolvon, son of the local lord. His two companions proceeded to introduce themselves as well. The other boy was Wagul, and the girl, Selia.

"Thank you very much for the courteous introductions," she said to the trio. "So, how can I help you?"

"Oh, um, yes," the boy named Cyril said with a stammer. "I was just, um, wondering if...this pasta is made from coldmoon buckwheat."

"Yes, I believe so..." she replied with a curious nod. If he wanted to know the ingredients, she hardly seemed like the right person to ask. "What about it?"

"Oh, um, I just thought that.. if this is made from coldmoon buckwheat, then, um...it's pretty amazing."

"...Oh? Why do you say that?"

Her eyes narrowed. Cyril shrank a little from her gaze and answered in a whisper.

"Because, um, this grain doesn't grow right now. It's the wrong season, which means it must have been harvested last winter. But this pasta tastes like it was made with fresh ingredients. I'm not sure how that's possible. Would you happen to know?"

Arshia stared at Cyril for a brief, speechless moment. This little boy had, in one short question, cut to the heart of the matter. He just distilled the essence of Perujin know-how.

"I'm surprised you noticed. That was very astute of you. It's because of selective breeding. We developed a strain of coldmoon buckwheat that seeds during slightly warmer weather."

“Really? You can do that? How?” asked the boy with the kind of astonishment that only arose from genuine interest. He asked another question, and then another, each more involved than the last, until the depth of the botanical knowledge he displayed matched the crease across Arshia’s brow.

Who in the world is this boy?

As if on cue, he promptly delivered the answer.

“We’re all going to be students in Her Highness’s academy.”

Ah… I see. So you’re the ones… The future students… The thought intrigued her. It hovered in her mind, evicting the resentment and indignation that previously occupied the space. *Could it be that…the pointlessness* is *the point? Is Princess Mia trying to send me a message? Tell me that it’s not even worth my time to accept apologies from people like them?*

Suddenly, words surfaced in her mind.

I don’t need Mia’s apology. There’s no point.

The one who’d spoken them…had been herself. And that was when, like the final piece of a puzzle falling into place, it all clicked. Forcing the nobles to apologize to her would have been pointless. Worse, actually. She’d have wasted her time listening to disingenuous pleas for forgiveness. That was why Mia hadn’t done this. Instead, she’d posed Arshia an unspoken question.

“In dwelling on such hollow sentiments, you are losing an opportunity to educate many talented children,” Mia seemed to say through pursed lips, *“and giving up the chance to continue the meaningful research you’ve been doing. Is that truly what you want?”*

But Arshia soon learned that Mia’s true goals were even loftier.

“Still, I do wonder why Princess Mia’s school will be teaching botany of all things?” she said, the question escaping her in a soft, contemplative whisper.

There was a strong tendency in the Tearmoon Empire to look down on everything related to agriculture. Why then would this new and prominent academy, whose construction was being personally overseen by the princess herself, bother with botany lessons? Her answer came from the boy Wagul.

“Princess Mia said… As long as we don’t starve… It’ll be okay no matter what happens…”

The exact quote was actually, “As long as we don’t starve, it’ll be okay no matter what happens. As long as there’s no revolution and no guillotine. That’s all I care about.” Arshia, however, would

never learn of the latter half of Mia's statement.

A bashful smile then spread across Wagul's lips as he told the story of how he first met Mia after he'd collapsed on the street of the slums, too famished even to cry out for help. When he finished, Selia began telling hers, describing her upbringing in the orphanage and a life equally marred by hunger and strife.

"As long as we don't starve... It'll be okay no matter what happens... That's why we need food. Lots of it. And in order to have lots of food, we need botanical knowledge. We need advancements in agricultural technology. That's what Princess Mia said," Selia recounted, concluding her story with a repeat of the quote.

Mia's words slammed into Arshia's chest with the force of a hammer before boring deep into her heart. They hurt. She bit her lip. The pain was so visceral. So real. Because they'd struck at the very core of her, resonating with remnants of words she'd once spoken herself, but forgotten. Words that now flared back to life with a deafening peal.

Despite its reputation as an agricultural country, Perujin had once experienced a terrible bout of famine. It had been a year of heavy rain and little sun, resulting in critically low crop yields across the board. Perujin royalty maintained a close connection with their people, most of whom were farmers. Faced with this devastation, the King went on a long journey that spanned the entirety of the country, visiting village after village and consoling his despondent subjects. Arshia had accompanied her father on the trip. Along the way, she saw many things. Men lying by the roadside, too hungry to move. Women staring into the distance, their faces unnaturally gaunt. And the outstretched arm of a young boy...

She never wanted to see such suffering again. It was too much. And it should never be allowed to repeat. So, she prayed...hoping that one day, the world would be free of such misery.

Arshia's eyes narrowed pensively at the small forms standing before her. She regarded them anew. At first, they'd seemed like any other children, well-clothed and well-fed, but the longer she looked, the more they started to resemble the small figures in her memory. The face of the young boy she'd seen on that terrible day superimposed itself over theirs.

It was meaningless for Perujin to flourish alone. Even if it surpassed Tearmoon in power... Even if it became stronger than all the other kingdoms put together, it would still be just one country. The world would not be rid of the misery she witnessed that day. It would simply be hidden from her by the veil of prosperity in Perujin. Somewhere out there, children would still be lying famished in the streets, their suffering unaltered. Those hypothetical children could be anyone, possibly even the ones she saw before her right now.

Why did I even go to Saint-Noel in the first place? What did I want to do?

Had it been to improve Perujin's agricultural technology and help the country flourish? Or to foster stability among her people and society? No. It hadn't been any of those. She'd gone because she wanted to end the cycle of misfortune. To craft a world in which no one would succumb to starvation.

I remember now... That was why I chose to study botany...

A young girl had willed a quiet prayer to the heavens, wishing for a world without the misery she saw all around her. She'd prayed and prayed, but harvest yields remained fickle as ever, and starvation continued to claim lives. So, in time, she'd given up. Her prayers, she'd thought, were meaningless; her wish, unheard.

And yet...

Arshia felt as though a hand had been extended to her. It belonged to a petite princess, radiant and regal, and in that moment, it dawned on her. All this time, she'd thought her prayers had gone unanswered, but what if she was wrong? What if the heavens had just taken some time to respond? This girl before her—this young princess who'd forced her way into Arshia's life—could be the answer to her long-forgotten prayer. For so long, she'd searched for a way to rid the world of the misery she'd seen. Now, she might be staring at that very path. The door had opened; she needed only to step through.

I thought...it'd never... But now, I... I can—

An emotion she'd never felt before filled her chest. It was intense, and it pushed her forward. She faced Mia and spoke in a solemn tone.

"Princess Mia, regarding your offer of the teaching position, if it

is still available, I would be honored to accept it."

"...Fwoo'd fwat?" Mia stared stupidly, her mouth stuffed full of the cake she'd been devouring as a knee-jerk coping mechanism for disappointment. Her chipmunk-shaped cheeks undulated a few more times but produced no further reply. Meanwhile, her sugar-laden brain struggled to process how the spectacular failure of her master plan had somehow transmuted itself into a resounding victory.

Arshia Tafrif Perujin.

The name was one for the history books, to be forever enshrined in the pantheon of mankind. It belonged to an outstanding scholar who, together with the child prodigy Cyril Rudolvon, developed a strain of wheat that could thrive in the cold, permanently freeing the continent from the scourge of famine...

Thus triumphed Mia the strategist, whose brilliant mind and peerless prescience—the likes of which were rarely seen throughout history—allowed her to successfully persuade Arshia. Indeed, the Great Sage of the Empire had held all the cards before the game even started. Feeling rather pleased after managing this extraordinary feat of sealing victory in advance of the battle itself, she decided to reward herself by indulging in cakes and sweets. In a display of gluttonous frenzy profoundly devoid of the aforementioned prescience, she swept through the pastries, consuming them with reckless abandon. All looming concerns were discarded, including a particularly crucial one—summer was fast approaching.

The Great Sage of the Empire failed to exercise her foresight. Consequently, she did not see coming the extreme humiliation that awaited her a mere month down the road. Forty days remained until F.A.T. would return to torment her once more.

Chapter 23: The Libra King and Mia's Loyal Subject

Tucked away in a corner of the imperial capital was a large paddock—the Moonhorse Court—primarily used by young nobles to practice their riding, and, today, by Mia as well.

"Let's go, Silver Moon!" she shouted as she flicked the reins of the horse whose name was definitely not Silver Moon. Nevertheless, it obeyed and moved into a trot. Mia grinned with delight, feeling the increasingly familiar bounce of the horse's back.

"I feel like I'm getting pretty good at this. Wouldn't you agree, Silver Moon?"

Her steed snorted in response. For some reason, she couldn't help but feel like the horse had just insulted her, as if the snort had been Horse for *The only thing you're getting is heavier, buddy.* She scowled at it.

Yes, she was having a conversation with a horse, and got upset at its reply. It was, perhaps, a testament to the power of her imagination.

Ever since returning to Lunatear, Mia had maintained a consistent riding schedule. Every day, she'd practice for a full two hours. On top of that, she kept up her dance practice as well. Never in her life had she exercised—hell, done anything—so diligently. As the season turned to summer, she spent her days enjoying a great deal of physical activity.

"I must admit, it really does feel good to get the body moving... Oh? What's she doing here?"

At the entrance to the paddock stood Anne, who was supposed to be waiting for her in the changing room. She gave her maid a curious look and steered Silver Moon toward her.

"Anne? What's the matter?"

"Milady, emissaries from both Sunkland and Remno have arrived."

"Oh, right. Those people. I assume one of them's Keithwood?"

said Mia as she dismounted her horse.

Anne promptly handed her a soft towel. She took it and wiped away the sweat on her face before letting out a breath of exertion.

"Uh, about that..." said Anne, trailing off hesitantly as she turned around.

Approaching them were three figures in hooded traveling cloaks.

Huh, thought Mia. *They're shorter than I expected.*

Her enthusiasm waned a little.

I'd expected one of them to be shorter, considering it's Keithwood, but I'm surprised the other two are the same height. It looks like Remno didn't send that Diamond Legion fellow after all. Shame...

Her calm, analytical attitude lasted all of ten seconds—until the figures took off their hoods. Well, the other two figures. The first to do so revealed himself to be Keithwood, which she'd expected.

"It's a pleasure to see you again, Princess Mia."

"The pleasure is mutual, Keithwood. Thank you very much for your cooperation in this matter. I'll be entrusting myself into your care," she said before turning to the two figures behind him. "And these gentlemen, I assume, I've yet to be acquainted with?"

She greeted them with a flawlessly courteous smile, only for it to freeze on her face when she heard their voices.

"Oh, I think we can skip the introductions, Princess Mia. I see you're quite the diligent rider. Impressive. Not everyone can stick to a practice schedule through the summer holidays."

It was a voice she recognized.

"Wait. What? How? Why?" She made a series of bewildered noises as the two figures removed their hoods. "Abel? And Sion? What are you doing here?"

The two princes traded mischievous grins.

"I was a little worried about you," explained Abel, "so I asked Sion for advice."

"Huh? I don't— Then... Huh?"

"In a nutshell, we decided that we'd both tag along as your guards. It's genius, really. I never imagined you could sneak out of a country like this."

"But... Is this, well... Okay?"

She looked from one prince to the other, her expression clouded with worry.

"Depends on your definition of 'okay,' I guess," said Sion with a

shrug. “It’s not exactly on the up and up, but we should be fine. We’re just going on a cruise with you and Miss Esmeralda, after all. What could go wrong?”

Judging by his leisurely tone, he actually meant what he said. Behind him, Keithwood rolled his eyes and let out a long-suffering sigh.

“Well, it won’t be the first time His Highness has given everyone around him a few heart attacks,” Keithwood muttered, trying to assuage—mostly his own—fears. “Compared to his previous antics, sneaking into another country to go on a cruise is...on the tamer side of things, I suppose.”

Oh, you’re a real workhouse, aren’t you, Keithwood? It’s okay, I feel your pain, what with having Sion as a boss. It must be hard trying to manage all his crazy ideas... Cleaning up after his shenanigans... You have my pity.

She sympathized with his plight. She, the instigator of the horse sandwich escapades, sympathized with how Keithwood had to deal with Sion’s fancies. She wasn’t particularly good at picking up on irony that revolved around herself.

“Pardon the intrusion, Your Highness, but I need a moment of your time.” Ludwig appeared, approaching her in a hurry. “Regarding your plans for the rest of the day—”

“Hey, good to see you, Ludwig. Last time we met was back at Remno, I think?”

Ludwig swerved in surprise and blinked at the speaker.

“Who— P-Prince Sion?! And Prince Abel? What are you doing in Tearmoon?”

Keithwood stepped in to fill in the details for the bewildered Ludwig.

“I see... To escort Her Highness...” Ludwig said after grasping the situation.

“Officially, at least. Well, as official as unauthorized participation in a foreign cruise can be, anyway,” Sion quipped. “Personally, I consider it to be more of a vacation with the people who are going to have my back in the battles to come. It’s a privilege to accompany you all on this trip.”

Ludwig bowed in respect.

“You are a blessing upon us all. It gives me great peace of mind to know that a pair of renowned princes will be joining Her Highness. Thank you both.”

Sion regarded Ludwig. For a time, the prince's expression was unreadable.

"For some reason... I find myself glad— No, more than that... I find myself deeply comforted by your words, Ludwig. I'm not sure why. The only other time we've conversed was in the Kingdom of Remno, and then only briefly. And yet, your approval fills me with gladness."

"I am honored that you appreciate my words. I trust you will take good care of Her Highness. On behalf of the entire empire, I thank you for your graciousness."

Ludwig met the two princes' gazes before lowering his head again in an even deeper bow.

It was on this day that a bond formed between the Great Sage of the Empire's loyal subject, Ludwig Hewitt, and the future Libra King, Sion Sol Sunkland. Two souls whose paths had ultimately diverged in the previous timeline were now, finally, united under Mia's banner.

Now, as for Mia herself...

"Wait... If they're coming as guards, they'll have to get on the cruise with me. And when we're on the cruise, we'll be wearing swimsuits, so... Oh my."

She gave her tummy a light pat. It jiggled. Just a little. It could be her mind playing tricks on her though. Still, she didn't try again. What she *did* do was try extra hard at her ensuing horseback riding and dance sessions.

Chapter 24: Princess Mia… Engages in Contemplation

Mia sat in the White Night Dining Hall of the Whitemoon Palace having a bit of a late lunch. Sion, Keithwood, and Abel were nowhere to be seen. Normally, visiting foreign royalty would be treated to the finest of cuisines in this very hall, but the clandestine nature of their presence precluded any overt welcome.

"We might as well take the opportunity to tour the capital then."

With that, the three of them had gone off on their own. In actuality, they were in the Newmoon District studying the various establishments associated with her, such as the hospital she'd built and the orphanage she favored. She, of course, had no idea and took their words at face value. Figuring they were off rubbernecking, she'd decided to take her time savoring her lunch while listening to Ludwig give his report. He spoke mainly of her summer schedule.

The Tearmoon Empire was not adjacent to any bodies of water, so going on a cruise would require her to first travel to a neighboring friendly nation. Upon hearing the name of the place she was headed, she scratched her head.

"Huh. I swear I've heard of this place before…"

The Emerald Star was currently moored at Ganudos Port Country. Situated along Tearmoon's western border, it was a small nation that had long positioned itself as a friendly subordinate of minor power, incomparably inferior to the empire in military strength and national output. Had it not been for the fact that it neighbored the inland sea of Galilea—its sole distinguishing feature—the whole country would have been relegated to a mere footnote in the geopolitical map of the continent. Many of the empire's eminent nobles considered the country a vassal state reliant on Tearmoon for security. Mia, however, knew better; she'd seen the true nature of their relationship firsthand when the empire began to topple. The abundant seafood provided by Ganudos, along with the

crops from Perujin, were critical sources of food for all of Tearmoon.

I still remember how Ludwig and I went there to beg them for help. Good times... she thought with a sardonic smile.

It had been vital for them to secure a deal with Ganudos, but what was supposed to be a reasonably smooth negotiation with a supposedly obedient country quickly ended up at an impasse.

"And it was all because the Greenmoons turned tail and fled," she muttered bitterly.

For as long as anyone could remember, the House of Greenmoon had always directed their attention overseas. Drawn by the enormous amounts of potential wealth that lay in foreign trade, every one of its Dukes had without fail pursued a proactive agenda abroad, leveraging their impressive influence to establish connections with nations bordering the sea. Ganudos Port Country was one of those nations.

That negotiation went about as well as smashing our heads into a brick wall. I'd rather not repeat the experience. The Greenmoons probably won't flee the empire if there's no revolution, but...

Nothing was for certain. That nightmarish famine was going to strike next year, and it was always possible that the Duke might fancy an extended vacation abroad.

I'd better establish a point of contact with them that's not through the Greenmoons. And I'd better do it early. If we go to them when we're running out of food, they'll just take advantage of us, but right now, the empire is still strong, so I can still throw my weight around as the Princess of Tearmoon. She paused. *That was figurative, of course. My figurative weight.*

The brave only need plan A, while the prudent prepare a Plan B. As for Mia... Well, she was the type to prefer having plans C to F as well. Sure, she had Forkroad & Co. establishing supply routes for grain, friendly relations with Perujin ensuring their support, a new strain of wheat to be developed, and healthy food stores resulting from proactive stockpiling, but if she could have *just a little more*. If she could just secure the supply of seafood from the Galilea Sea, she'd finally feel prepared. Also, it'd be great if somebody could get that done for her while she was off on her pleasure cruise. She glanced at her bespectacled subject.

"Ludwig, you'll be accompanying me to Ganudos for the upcoming cruise."

“Understood. I assume I’ll be establishing a channel of communication with the country?”

“Absolutely.”

She spread a big dollop of jam onto her bread and took a bite. Then, she frowned.

I do wonder though. What was Ganudos planning to do if the empire recovered?

Ultimately, it hadn’t mattered, as the Tearmoon Empire had fallen to the revolution, but had it survived the famine and regained its strength...it certainly wouldn’t let Ganudos’s reluctance to provide aid go unmentioned. Retaliatory sanctions would surely follow.

Were they so desperate to take down the empire that they’d put everything on the line? No, that doesn’t seem right... How curious. Maybe the Greenmoons had *been conspiring with the Serpents all this time, and the others had been right to suspect them...*

Esmeralda herself might be uninvolved, but her innocence did not prove her family’s.

Could they sink the whole boat? Sacrifice Esmeralda to drown us all in one fell swoop? No, I doubt they’d go that far...but it doesn’t hurt to make sure. Every possibility needs to be considered...

She chewed on it some more—the sweet bolus of jam and bread in her mouth, that is—before taking a sip of tea, swallowing only after she had fully relished the tastes. Then, she turned to face Ludwig.

“One more thing. After our boat departs, have Dion meet up with you. He is to accompany you for all activities in Ganudos.”

“Sir Dion? Are we expecting something of...that level of severity to occur?”

“Consider it a precaution. It’s not that I don’t trust Vanos and the Princess Guard, but...if things take a violent turn, is there anyone you’d rather have at your side?”

The thing about Dion was that she couldn’t stand him, but she also trusted him. In case things got thorny, she’d rather have him close. Just not too close. Definitely not on the yacht with her.

Considering he’ll have to come all the way from the empire, it’ll be easier for him to just wait at Ganudos instead of sailing out to our boat anyway.

When it came to her own safety, Mia spared no expense.

“As for what the two of you should do there, I’ll leave that to

your respective discretions."

With that, she proceeded to finish the rest of her lunch.

Chapter 25: Esmeralda's Scheme

Esmeralda Etoile Greenmoon left early for Ganudos Port Country, arriving in advance of Mia's contingent. After scowling through the tedious exchange of greetings with the country's dignitaries, she spent the remaining days of her wait lounging in refined luxury.

As a minor power, Ganudos's resources were a mere fraction of Tearmoon's, and it was unable to match even just one of the Four Dukes in financial muscle. It did, however, have one feature worthy of mention—its shipyards. These people knew how to make watercraft. In fact, the Greenmoons' sailing yacht was the work of Ganudos shipwrights. Expertly built and immensely beautiful, it spent most of the year docked, displaying its exquisite craftsmanship to passersby. The only time it saw action was in the summer, when Esmeralda would take it out for a leisure cruise. With a hull painted bright green, two prominent masts, and an artistic figurehead at its bow, its magnificent figure impressed even the fussy Esmeralda, who currently sat in the captain's cabin humming cheerily to herself.

"Oho ho, it looks like you walked right into my trap, *Miss Mia*."

The smoothness with which her plan was proceeding pleased her to no end. So great was her elation that even the unsteady rocking of the vessel felt more fun than nauseating, and she couldn't help but express her glee through laughter. Before she could erupt into another bout, a girl interrupted her.

"Excuse me, milady."

The girl was two years her senior, and she'd been tending to Esmeralda's personal needs since they were both children.

"Oh? Is something the matter, uh..."

"It's Nina, milady," said the girl promptly, offering a reminder of her name without batting an eye.

"Ah. Is it now? Pardon, but I don't go around memorizing the names of all my attendants," Esmeralda said without the faintest hint of apology.

It was, in her opinion, a matter of course, just like how she couldn't care less where the tea she drank came from, so long as it tasted good. She was one of the chosen, and it was only right for her to enjoy the best. Tea leaves, attendants, they were all the same to her. As long as they perfectly satisfied her needs, their identity was irrelevant. This, she thought, was what it meant to be upper class. To be *noble*. It was what she'd been taught, and it was what she believed.

"Of course, milady. I am well aware."

"Good. So, what's the matter?"

"I wished to inform you that Her Highness has arrived at the port." Nina paused as if hesitant. "But there's something that I find odd. It's about the guards with her."

"The guards?"

"Yes. She is accompanied by members of the Princess Guard..."

"Why, that seems perfectly normal to me. She's the princess, so of course she'd be accompanied by members of the Princess Guard. In fact, it's practically her duty as someone of noble birth. Bringing anyone of lower standing would be unseemly."

Undeterred by her dismissive tone, Nina continued.

"You are right of course, milady, but she wishes to bring five of them onto the yacht with her."

"Five? That's...quite a few" That elicited a frown. "I can understand a man or two, but *five*? Seems a bit much to me, especially when we're providing our own guards."

It wasn't like Mia was getting onto an enemy boat. This vessel belonged to the Duke of Greenmoon, who was a subject of the Emperor. She would be among friends.

"Oooooh, I know what she's thinking. I'll bet she's worried we'll run into something scary, like pirates or some monster of the deep. Oho ho, it seems Miss Mia is quite the scaredy-cat."

Never did it cross her mind that she herself might be included in the list of worrying encounters.

"Not that it bothers me," she continued, "but hm, I suppose I do feel a little sorry for her having to embarrass herself in front of her private guards. Oho ho..." She smirked. "I'm very much looking forward to seeing that play out. Oh, what a treat that will be..."

Thus did Mia walk steadily toward the dreadful trap that Esmeralda had set for her. In fact, the trap was doubly dreadful, because there were two parts to it. Before the addition of Mia's

public humiliation, Esmeralda had planned a private one. First, she was going to watch Mia flounder about in the water and *laugh*. She wouldn't let her risk drowning of course, but knowing Mia's inexperience with water, she'd probably be scared to even submerge her head. The thought of watching a panicked Mia flail around in the sea was absolutely golden, and she simply had to see it for herself.

Next came the second part. As Mia struggled, Esmeralda would swoop in like the big sister she was and show the hapless princess how to swim. It was an excellent scheme—prank and play all rolled into one. She'd get back at Mia for showing her up the other day, and she'd also get to frolic in the water with her. Esmeralda, you see, mostly generally considered herself to be one of Mia's best friends.

As an aside, while Mia might sink like a stone, even she could manage a feat like submerging her head. As a devout bath lover, she had on many occasions succumbed to the urge to plunge her head into the warm, watery depths. She was a master tub diver! If absolutely nothing else...

"Oho ho, how exciting! How wonderfully exciting!"

With a spring in her step, Esmeralda strolled out of the cabin, leaving only her sonorous laughter echoing within.

...As a second aside, being the thoughtful and considerate friend that she was, Esmeralda had made sure to bring a swimsuit for Mia as well. Crafted by expert tailors to conform to the latest trends, it was one of the "terribly indecent" kinds that bared the entirety of the abdomen! Furthermore, it was designed as a pair with the other one being for Esmeralda. They'd be wearing matching swimsuits!

For obvious reasons, the only reaction this would draw from Mia would be some mix of consternation and horror, but believe it or not, it was actually being done in good faith. Esmeralda was just trying to be a good friend.

Chapter 26: It's Showdown Time!

"...So that's the Emerald Star," said Mia as she gazed upon the refined beauty of the sailing yacht before her.

A number of technologies were employed to realize its elegant contours and compact size, which were designed for optimal maneuverability amongst the countless islands that dotted the Galilea Sea. The sight of this marvel of engineering drew from her lips a soft, murmured comment.

"Looks sort of like a budget boat..."

To give some context, the only watercraft Mia had ever known were the massive ferries around Saint-Noel Academy. To her, the word "boat" referred to gigantic vessels that could carry numerous carriages in one go. They were imposing things radiating a breathtaking majesty through size alone. The Emerald Star, meanwhile, was no more than the size of two or three horse-drawn carriages put together.

"Esmeralda kept boasting about it, so I thought for sure it'd be enormous. This is sort of a letdown, honestly."

In general, Mia subscribed to the belief "bigger is better." The sense of scale was important. Sheer size elicited a visceral sense of awe. In that sense, the yacht before her looked more like a toy than a vehicle and failed to evoke any feeling in her other than disappointment.

It bears mentioning that the Emerald Star was a pleasure craft, not a merchant ship or military vessel. It wasn't designed to carry large amounts of cargo or be mounted with cannons, so it didn't need to be big. Quite the opposite, in fact. State-of-the-art technology allowed it to minimize its girth by doing away with all but the most crucial functions, resulting in a sleek, efficient design.

...Which was completely lost on Mia.

With her arms folded, Mia gazed snobbily up at the boat. Flanking her were the guards of her retinue, and behind her stood Abel, ready to leap to her defense at a moment's notice. Regarding

them from a distance was Sion, who leaned over to converse with Ludwig.

"Out of curiosity, Ludwig, would you happen to know what Mia's intentions are in joining this cruise?"

"...Intentions? What exactly do you mean?"

"Nothing much. If she's here to have some fun, then that's perfectly fine. She's human too, after all. It's just that..." Sion's eyes narrowed. "With an inscrutable and dangerous organization like the Chaos Serpents actively maneuvering behind the scenes, I can't help but wonder if she'd come all this way just to have some fun."

Ludwig nodded at the question.

"You are very perceptive, Prince Sion. It is as you say. As a matter of fact, Her Highness is of the belief that a large-scale famine will strike in the near future."

"...A famine?"

"Yes. It will be severe, and it will affect the entire continent."

Ludwig proceeded to explain in detail the steps Mia had taken to prepare.

"Well. This is all news to me..."

"I suspect the lack of tangible evidence for its advent is what has kept her from speaking openly. Frankly, I myself still harbor doubts about the claim. The eye of man cannot perceive the future. Therefore, I'd chosen to interpret her words as metaphor. An indirect way of criticizing the deficiencies in the empire's food supply chains..." Ludwig paused before resuming in a more sober tone. "However, we are seeing a very cool summer right now. Years like these tend to see lower yields during harvest season." He turned his gaze to the sea, its sparkling surface reflecting off his glasses. "That is why the imported seafood from Ganudos will be extremely important. Currently, all our communication with them is under the purview of the Duke of Greenmoon. I believe Her Highness deems this arrangement to be...unsatisfactory in the inherent risk it poses."

Ludwig's explanation left Sion in shock.

"I had no idea... I knew she cared about the welfare of her people, but the lengths she's going to..."

He already afforded her a great deal of respect, but clearly, it still wasn't enough.

"Stockpiling for a potential famine, I can understand," Sion continued. "Her revitalization of the slums, as well, is a triumph of

governance. But using Miss Chloe's family to establish a supply network aboard? Promoting education and battling dogma through the academy city project? The sheer breadth of her vision... It's breathtaking. I never imagined..." He blinked. A thought had occurred to him. "In that case... Ludwig, would you happen to have any plans to speak with this country's government while Mia's out at sea?"

"I certainly do. I plan to do everything in my power, but without the cooperation of the Greenmoons, I suspect that the negotiations will prove difficult. Her Highness is doubtlessly aware of this fact...which may explain why she agreed to Lady Esmeralda's invitation," said Ludwig, his gaze shifting toward Mia. "A showdown with the Greenmoon Etoiline is imminent, and Her Highness is waiting to step into the ring. In the meantime, I intend to make myself useful in whatever way I can."

"Ah, Miss Mia. What a pleasure it is to see you," Esmeralda said as she descended from the yacht.

"The pleasure is all mine," replied Mia with an exemplary curtsy and a flawlessly polite smile. "Thank you very much for inviting me on this wonderful cruise."

"You hardly need to thank me so formally. We're best friends, aren't we? This is just what best friends do."

Esmeralda replied with a bright smile of her own. Hers, by the way, was completely genuine. She was actually looking forward to spending some quality time with Mia.

"I was told, though, that you'd like to bring quite a few guards with you..."

"Yes. Five, in fact, and I was hoping to receive your permission for them to accompany us."

"Well, I'd love to grant them permission, but just so they know, the only men allowed on my vessel are *handsome* ones. These," she said as she spread her arms in a flourish. A group of men, all young and handsome, lined up behind her. "Are my guards, and they represent the bar for inclusion. What do you think? Dashing fellows, aren't they? Are your guards up to snuff?" She let out a haughty chuckle. "I've heard it said that there are a great many ruffians in the Princess Guard. There is a certain etiquette to these things, you know? These people have a reputation to keep up. I do think you should be a tad more selective when it comes to your personal

guards."

Standing behind Mia were the men of the Princess Guard. Their expressions darkened immediately at the comment, and she could almost feel the hostility radiating off them.

Ah, it looks like... I'll have to stand my ground and fight this one.

Failing to retaliate would harm the morale of her guards. After all, who would be willing to risk their lives protecting a princess who couldn't be bothered to defend their honor? The men of the Princess Guard were some of her closest allies. They'd remained loyal to her in the previous timeline even after she'd been abandoned by most others. Those present were former members of Dion's squad, but seeing as they'd perished early in the previous timeline, she harbored no personal enmity toward them. They, meanwhile, were very fond of her, seeing as she'd saved them from fighting a meaningless war. Owing to their gratitude, the Princess Guard maintained a high level of morale, and Mia intended to keep it that way. Any comments that threatened to lower it would be met with a swift rebuke. She met Esmeralda's gaze and spoke with confidence.

"Oh? How odd. I *am* quite selective when it comes to my personal guard, and these are the people I deemed suitable for the station. They are tasked with my safety, so my guards are all skilled, powerful men whom I can depend on."

First came the flattery. Next was the flex.

"Besides, only two of the Princess Guard will be accompanying me. The others are my friends."

"Hm? Your friends? Who migh— What?!"

Esmeralda, who'd had one eyebrow raised, was forced to lift the second in shock when three of the figures behind Mia stepped forward.

"I trust *they* are sufficiently handsome to be permitted to board?"

"Wh-Wh-What in the— Why is Prince Sion here? And you... Why, you're the prince from the Kingdom of Remno!"

Esmeralda squealed at the sight of the two charming princes. Mia's understanding of her was spot-on. Esmeralda had a thing for pretty boys, and she had detailed knowledge of who the prettiest were at Saint-Noel. She looked from one to the other, her mind racing with thoughts such as *Prince Sion's younger than me...but totally my type!* and *That attendant Keithwood's a real looker too...*

Should I make a move?!

...Basically, her mind was made up of mostly the same stuff as Mia's.

In any case, the simultaneous appearance of the Sion-Abel-Keithwood trio proved too electrifying for her to handle, and she swooned, toppling backward. Her line of handsome guards rushed to catch her. Mia watched, basking in a sense of superiority.

Hah! The showdown is over, and the winner is clear!

She put on her smuggest grin before going in for the final blow.

"Just so you know, Abel and Sion were worried about my safety, so they volunteered to guard me on this cruise. I'd very much appreciate it if they could be given permission to board this boat."

Chapter 27: Princess Mia... Lives It Up! (More Foreshadowing...)

The Emerald Star left port with Mia's group aboard. Its numerous sails caught a brisk wind, and the yacht steadily gained speed. The sky was a cloudless blanket of blue, and sunlight streamed down unimpeded. The summer was a cool one so far, but the sun's glare was still fierce. Bathed in its light, Mia's hair shimmered with equal intensity. A salty sea breeze blew across the deck, and her argent strands fluttered in its wake. She stood at the bow, her arms outspread, and laughed with delight as she felt the wind on her skin.

"This is wonderful! It's like I'm flying!"

Mia, when boarding the Emerald Star, had forgotten to take her grievances about the yacht with her. They now sat on the shore, lonely and abandoned, while their master thoroughly enjoyed sailing on what was supposed to be a "budget craft." She could be forgiven for letting herself go though. Her recent days had been an ongoing cycle of exercise and dieting, which had caused a steady accumulation of stress. The liberation of the sea proved too tempting, and she couldn't help but get a little carried away.

Well, maybe more than a little...

A particularly large wave rolled into the vessel from the side, causing it to heave. Water splashed across the deck, and the whole boat leapt up as though it'd suddenly crested a hill before dropping back down.

"...Eh?"

Mia, who'd been leaning over the side, was caught completely off guard—not that she could have reacted any better even if she was prepared—and thrown off the deck...

"Watch out!"

...Only to be pulled into a protective embrace in the nick of time.

"Oh, moons, that was close. Thank you very much— Eek!"

She squealed when she craned her neck to glance backward, for the pair of arms wrapped gently around her belonged to none other than...

"A-A-Abel?!"

Upon recognizing her rescuer, her eyes immediately sent a signal racing from her optic nerve into her spine so quickly that it bypassed her brain. On pure reflex, she activated the emergency fail-safe of all young, self-conscious girls.

Abdominal muscles engaged. Flattening belly.

Abel, completely oblivious to her reaction, let out a breath of relief.

"You know, you can be surprisingly childish sometimes, Mia..." he said softly.

"Wha— Abel! Were you watching the whole time?" Her cheeks reddened as she recalled her overeager actions that almost led to her falling off the yacht. "O-Oh, you...big meanie! You could have at least said something if you were watching me..."

"I would have, but... I sort of forgot." He scratched his cheek, failing to meet her gaze. "You were...just too enchanting a sight."

"Hnngh!"

She clenched her fists, feeling the heat spread through her cheeks. Her heart rose, as if still carried by the prior wave, and threatened to take leave of her chest.

C-C-Can he even hear himself? How can he say things like that with a straight face? Moons, Abel! I swear! Sometimes, you just have no clue!

After venting her frustrations in silent soliloquy, she took a deep breath to calm herself.

Okay, I have to remember that I'm older. I'm the big sister here. Abel is younger. He's just a kid. Just a kid. Just a kid. Just a kid...

After reciting the incantation a few times in her head, she put on what she hoped was the irreverent air of the unflappable big sister she desperately strove to be.

"My, for the supposedly smooth Prince of Remno, that sure was a cheesy line."

It came out a little awkward, her voice cracking just a little too often to be entirely convincing, but she deserved some sympathy for her poor performance. Abel's charm was simply too much. Projecting casual confidence was a tall order when her brain was turning to mush.

Abel quipped back with a grin.

“Oh? I thought the Great Sage of the Empire liked her cheeses. After all, that’s why I serve my lines with them,” he said as he placed his hands on her hips. “Pardon me, milady.”

“Huh? Waaaaaah!”

He proceeded to pick her up and place her on a platform further toward the boat’s prow.

“Wh-What are you doing?!”

“Take a look for yourself.”

He motioned in the direction they were sailing. She sheepishly obeyed, turning around to look to the front of the boat.

“Wow...” she said as a gasp escaped her. “It’s an even better view from up here!”

A few clouds had appeared in the sky, dotting the blue canvas with puffs of white. The sun shining through them painted kaleidoscopic patterns of light and shadow across the surface of the sea. A wave, taller than the last, rolled through the boat, throwing up droplets of water that glittered like gems. The ever-shifting coruscation was a mesmerizing, almost magical, sight.

“How is it up there? Feels even more like flying, doesn’t it?”

“It certainly does. This is simply breathtaking.”

She beamed at him, but soon puckered her lips and looked away.

“Hm? What’s wrong?”

“Um, when you lifted me just now... Did I feel, um...heavy?” she asked, fidgeting nervously with her fingers.

Abel blinked at her a few times before breaking out into laughter.

“Heavy? You? Come on, seriously?”

“Huh? B-But...”

“The reason I’ve got my hands on you right now is because I’m worried you’ll just float away on the wind. You’re light as a feather.”

“I... You... Hnnnngh!” She held her flushed cheeks and squirmed at his honey-laced words. “A-Abel, you absolute scoundrel! I know what you’re doing! You’re just buttering me up! I’m on to you!”

He grinned.

“Are you now? Good. Then you’ll know to come to me for your dairy needs. I’ve got all the cheese and butter you’ll ever want.”

At the end of her saccharine exchange with Abel, she found

herself filled with a sense of fulfillment.

I'm…really living it up right now!

Indeed, Mia was living it up. Upper than ever before. She relished the bliss of the moment. *Luxuriated* in it.

Which was why she failed to notice how the white clouds in the distance, as if grimacing at the P.D.A., had begun to take on a gray tint.

Chapter 28: Where the Path of Arrogance Leads

Esmeralda watched as Mia frolicked about the yacht's prow, giggling and squealing and generally behaving in a fashion that tended to elicit remarks such as "get a room." The young Etoiline smiled in satisfaction.

"Oho ho, Miss Mia seems to be enjoying herself. Excellent. For those of us with noble blood, the search for a life partner is a most important duty, after all. I must say though, I always thought someone like Prince Sion was more to her liking. This sweetheart of hers, what was his name again? Prince Abel of Remno? Not quite the same type, but still a very pretty face. Oho ho, now I know what she looks for in a man..." Her contented monologue then took on a more peeved tone. "Still, it's a little upsetting that she's paid so little attention to me. I'll settle the score with her later...by splashing water on her face! Yes, that'll teach her! Once we—"

Her excitement was interrupted by her maid, Nina, who quietly appeared at her side.

"Excuse me, milady."

"Yes? Is something the matter, Ni— Ahem, *maid*?"

"Yes, milady. The captain has informed me that a storm is approaching and will reach us sometime tomorrow. We are advised to refrain from stopping at the island."

"My, a storm?" Esmeralda looked dubiously up at the sky. "It certainly seems pretty clear to me. Are you sure the captain isn't just imagining things?"

"I must remind yo—"

"Remind? The only one who needs to be reminded right now is *you* of the fact that this is *my* cruise. Do you really think something so unpleasant would happen to us when I am present?"

She glared at Nina, who quietly lowered her head.

"I apologize. I was out of line. Please forgive me for my impertinence."

“So long as you understand. You are forgiven. Now, go tell the captain to proceed as planned,” she commanded before strolling happily off toward the bow.

Nina watched her go, letting out a deep sigh that was carried off by the wind before it reached her master’s ears.

“Miss Mia, I trust you are enjoying yourself?”

The question woke Mia from her Abel-fueled reverie. With a start, she turned to discover a smiling Esmeralda, who’d walked up beside her without her noticing. It suddenly dawned on her that all the giggling and squealing and get-a-room antics she’d been partaking in with Abel were, in fact, rather embarrassing. She quickly hid this sentiment behind a polite smile.

“Yes, the cruise has been reasonably pleasant so far. This boat had seemed a tad mediocre at first, but the experience of actually being on board has been surprisingly agreeable.”

“Oho ho, it’s an honor to receive such compliments. I’ll relay your sentiments to my father as well.”

“By the way, Esmeralda,” said Mia, brows suddenly furrowed in thought. “I was wondering what exactly a cruise entails. Do we just sail around like this?”

“Hm? What do you mean?”

“Well, I just assumed that there would be some swimming involved...”

She’d been expecting to learn how to swim. It was, in fact, why she’d decided to come in the first place!

Then again, no swimming means more boat time...and more boat time means more... Remembering the romantic experience she’d just had, an enamored sigh escaped her lips. *I wouldn’t mind some more of that. Actually, now that I think about it, maybe learning to swim isn’t so important...*

Just as her priorities were beginning to slip, Esmeralda reassured her with a nod.

“Of course there will be time for swimming. The island we’re headed to right now has a beach that will allow us to enjoy some quality time in the water.”

“Really? We’re going to an island?” Abel joined their conversation. “The only island I’ve ever been to is Saint-Noel. What’s this one like?”

Esmeralda shot him a scrutinizing look, her eyes slowly

scanning from the top of his head down to the tips of his toes. Finally, she nodded with approval. Apparently, Abel's appearance passed her good looks test.

"In that case, Prince Abel, you'll find this island to be considerably smaller than Saint-Noel. It does, however, have an inlet that's perfect for swimming. Imagine... A soft beach, fine white sand, clear blue water... It's like paradise." She smiled at him. "I must admit though, Her Highness has found herself some very good friends. I'm almost jealous."

"That's right," Mia said, her ego swelling with secondhand pride at hearing Abel praised. "You *should* be jealous."

Just then, Anne appeared.

"Sorry for interrupting, milady, but do you have a moment?"

"Oh, Anne. Sure. What's going on?"

"I think we should take out that swimsuit Miss Rafina prepared for you and—"

"My, Your Highness," Esmeralda interjected with a sneer, "you bothered to learn your maid's name?"

"Hm? Well, yes. She's not just any maid, you know? She's one of my most loyal and trusted subjects. Of course I know her name."

"M-Milady..." Anne's lips quivered with emotion, but she quickly got a hold of herself and turned to face Esmeralda.

"I apologize for not introducing myself earlier. I'm Princess Mia's maid. My name is Anne Littstein."

"My! How presumptuous of you to assume I'd want to know your name. Moreover, for someone whom Her Highness has such a needlessly good opinion of, you sure don't look very clever. Oho ho." Her laugh was contemptuous. "Just so you know, Princess Mia's maid, I don't go around memorizing the names of all the nobodies who serve me. Therefore, I will not call you by your name either. It's nothing personal. All right?"

She let out one of her trademark noble girl laughs, back arched and face to the sky, before casting a haughty glance down at Mia.

"Such eccentric behavior, Miss Mia, to be memorizing the names of your attendants. Surely, you have better things to do with your time. Those of regal blood should behave in an appropriately regal manner. Spend too much time with the riffraff, and their ways might start rubbing off on you. Be careful, all right? Oho ho."

Mia made no reply. She regarded the snickering Esmeralda, feeling rather conflicted.

I should warn her. For her own sake. But she probably wouldn't listen…

She knew where Esmeralda's current path of arrogance led.

I hope she realizes on her own. Before she's made *to realize.*

When a high-ranking noble made a mess of things, there was a good chance the imperial family would end up sharing in the blame. To that end, Mia strongly wished for Esmeralda to smarten up and get her act together. It'd keep the guillotine away. From both of them.

After all, losing her own head had been awful, but watching Esmeralda lose hers would probably leave a pretty bad taste in her mouth too.

Chapter 29: Thrown Overboard! — Princess Mia… Displays a Seductress's Charm—

It was smooth sailing for Mia's party as the Emerald Star pushed through the water at a brisk pace. The yacht's masts were designed to optimize performance, allowing its sails to efficiently harness the wind's momentum. Down below, improvements to the bilge greatly reduced the roll and pitch. All in all, its passengers enjoyed a fairly luxurious experience as they cruised quickly and evenly through the sea.

"Ah, I see it! Look! That's the island I spend my summers on every year! It's uninhabited, so we're free to go wherever we want!"

Mia, who'd been dozing on a blanket spread across the deck, woke to Esmeralda's announcement. She opened one sleepy eye, closed it immediately from the noon sun's glare, and slowly got up to her knees.

"Oh… So we've arrived…"

Looking out into the distance, the silhouette of an island did indeed appear in her blurry view. It looked a lot smaller than Saint-Noel but still large enough that she wouldn't have been surprised to encounter residents. A mountain rose from the island's center, while the rest of it was covered in lush green vegetation. A white beach was also visible, though access from the sea was denied by a number of large rocks that jutted out from the water, forcing the Emerald Star to stop some ways out from land. The distance to the island was about 300m—that's three hundred moontales, for the uninitiated. That obviously wasn't swimmable, so they lowered some small rafts to get them to shore.

"We're…still pretty far out…" said Mia as she clung anxiously to the side of her boat.

The Emerald Star carried three boats in total. Mia and Esmeralda got into the first one, along with Nina, Anne, one of Esmeralda's guards, and a rower. The second one ferried Sion, Abel,

Keithwood, and Mia's guards with another rower, while the slightly larger third one was used to transport the luggage they needed for their stay on the island. Thus, the group made for land...and that was exactly when Esmeralda chose to strike!

Operation Payback, Stage One: Humiliate Mia by taking advantage of the fact that she can't swim!

"Look, Miss Mia, over there!" Esmeralda exclaimed as she leaned over the side of the boat and pointed.

"Hm? What am I supposed to be looking at?" asked Mia, shuffling over with a puzzled frown.

"That! Can't you see? Look, over there..."

An evil grin spread across Esmeralda's lips.

Oho ho, it's terribly difficult to keep small boats like these balanced, you know?

Mia approached, the boat swaying back and forth below her feet. Then, all of a sudden, the world flipped on its head.

"...Eh?"

That was all she managed to say before being flung overboard, plunging head first into the sea with a splash.

"Eeeek! Help! I-I'm drowning! I'm drownngggghhh... Blub blub blub..."

"Milady!"

Anne shrieked in dismay at the sight of Mia slapping frantically at the water in a futile bid to stay afloat. Despite being in equal danger of drowning, the maid's concern was for her mistress. Esmeralda, meanwhile, regarded the scene with utmost nonchalance as she bobbed beside their overturned craft.

The island has a long shoal, and we're already pretty close. If she calms down and checks, she'll realize the water's shallow enough to stand in...but she won't! And I'm not going to tell her! So she'll just keep panicking and embarrass herself in front of everyone! Oho ho!

Stage one of her plan was going remarkably smoothly. She wouldn't dare pull a stunt like this with the princes on board, but she'd seen to it that other than Mia and Anne, the occupants of her boat consisted entirely of her own people. In other words, she'd resolved to condemn all her attendants—and indeed, even herself—to a watery fate for the sake of this plan. She was literally willing to go down with the ship, so long as she dragged Mia down with her. And it had *worked like a charm*. Now, the silly princess was flailing around uselessly in the water and making a total fool of herself...

But that was as far as she got with her plan before getting a taste of the Mia Special which, when previously employed against Keithwood, had earned its user the title of "Seductress."

"S-Someone...help me...blub blub..."

"Mia! I'm coming!"

"Stay calm! We'll be there soon!"

Two voices, equal in volume and urgency, rang out as the pair of princes dove gallantly off their boat in unison. Both turned out to be competent swimmers, and they reached her before long.

"Mia, relax! Keep your eyes on me!"

Abel was in front of her, urging calm as he approached. Unfortunately for him, Mia all but pounced on him, clutching whatever she could get her hands on with the desperate, primal strength of a creature fighting to survive. This immediately impaired his ability to swim, sending both of them downward.

As any good lifeguard knows, one does not approach a drowning person from the front. This is why.

Sion, meanwhile, had circled behind, talking in a placating voice as he tried to get his arms around her.

"Take it easy, Mia. Just relax. People can naturally float—Hm?"

He promptly froze when he noticed something. Rather, when he *felt* something. Then, he sighed and shook his head.

"Okay, the two of you can stop fighting for dear life now. It's shallow enough to stand."

"...Eh?"

That got her to stop. She gingerly extended one leg downwards. The tip of her shoe touched solid ground.

"M-My... You seem to be right... O-Oho ho, how silly of me..."

She let out a nervous laugh, trying to save some scrap of dignity by injecting some humor into the situation, only to look up and find herself staring straight into Abel's eyes. They were very serious, very concerned, and very very close. It was then that she realized that they were practically locked in an embrace. She was clinging to him! With all four limbs, no less! Furthermore, Sion was pressed up against her from behind. Put simply, she was currently sandwiched between two handsome princes, clothes soaked and skin touching.

It was the stuff of dreams! And she was living it right now! Never before had she experienced such profound titillation. So profound, in fact, that it made her head spin. She swayed, and the

princes rushed to keep her from falling. Sion glanced at Abel.

"I think...we'd better stay like this for now. I'll have Keithwood handle our boat. In the meantime, we can help her get to shore."

"Right. Let's do that," agreed Abel before turning back to her. "But Mia, you really need to stop giving us heart attacks."

"Yes, I know. I apologize..."

She buried her reddened face in her hands, ostensibly ashamed of her behavior.

Sweet moons, those two... They're getting manlier by the day... Mmm...

In actuality, it was a slightly different emotion, with its focus directed more outward than in.

A bewildered and soaking-wet Esmeralda watched the scene unfold from a distance.

"H-Huh? She's the one who just humiliated herself... So how come she gets the boys? What in the moons is... Hey, Ni— Ahem. You, explain this situation to me," she demanded of the maid standing by her side.

"If I may be allowed to speak plainly, milady," replied Nina in an impassive tone, "I have heard it said that men are creatures of peculiar taste, charmed as much by what a woman cannot do as what she can."

"And what exactly is that supposed to mean?"

"Take yourself, for example. You, milady, are a competent swimmer. When your boat keels over, as it just did, you do not panic. You can even submerge your face under water without hesitation. These are all well and good, impressive feats in their own right. But..." She stopped for a second to shake her head. "It also means there is no need to come to your aid."

"...Ah."

Esmeralda gaped, stunned by the realization. Nina continued.

"It is important to present a certain degree of vulnerability when it comes to such matters, milady. I urge you to commit my advice to memory."

Unlike Anne and her supposed mastery of romantic maneuvering, this maid offered up some legitimately sound advice. Esmeralda fell silent, contemplating the implications of this new knowledge as she turned her gaze back toward Mia, who was making little splashing noises as she paddled herself toward shore

with the two princes helping to hold her afloat. The princess was beaming, clearly enjoying herself. Esmeralda studied that smile and felt...a sense of respect, like when a skilled opponent landed a good strike in a duel.

"...I see. So that's how you wormed your way into their hearts. A real seductress, aren't you? Touché, Miss Mia. Touché."

In that moment, Esmeralda felt she saw Mia anew, having gained a clearer (and completely imaginary) understanding of her rival's true competence.

Soon after, Keithwood arrived with the second boat to rescue the rest of the waterlogged victims.

Chapter 30: Two Chickens (Of the Human Variety)

With the attentive help of the two princes, Mia finally reached the island and got herself onto dry land.

After being lowered to her feet, she walked around a little, admiring the ivory beach. The crunchy sound of sand shifting under her feet made her giggle with glee.

“My, what a wonderful sight this is...”

The tiny grains rolled easily across one another, glittering like gems. Closer inspection revealed that they were even shaped like stars. She walked along the beach, its surface white and pristine like fresh snow, feeling as if she’d wandered into some sort of magical wonderland. Behind her, soft summer clouds hung in the sky over an emerald sea. Gentle waves rolled onto the shore, their rhythmic splashing placid and calming.

“This is truly paradise.”

“Mmhm, I’m glad the island is to your liking.”

She turned to find Esmeralda, who’d presumably arrived not too long ago. Water still dripped from her long hair. She had her hand on her hips and made no attempt to hide her smug self-satisfaction.

“I come here every summer, and I always have a wonderful time.”

“Do you now... By the way, Esmeralda, what are we going to do at night?”

“I’ll have some tents set up a little ways away from here. Nothing fancy, but they’ll do for a short stay. Have you ever fallen asleep to the sounds of nature? Heard the soft symphony of evening critters? It’s quite the experience.”

It might come as a surprise to some, but Esmeralda was actually quite the outdoorswoman. The average noble girl couldn’t bear the thought of sleeping anywhere that wasn’t an enclosed bedchamber, but Esmeralda was no average noble. She was an Etoile, and her

tastes were far more elevated. She knew how to appreciate the true finer pleasures.

It just so happened that Mia was also no stranger to the outdoors.

The ambience of nature, huh... Listening to the chirping of insects... Gazing up at a starry sky... While maybe huddling around a bonfire with Prince Abel while we profess our undying love for each other... Mmm. I approve of this. It sounds wonderfully romantic. Ah, but maybe it's still a little too early for that last part...

Ever since boarding the yacht, Mia's brain had remained firmly in romance mode. She'd spent most of the cruise alternating between envisioning various saccharine situations involving Abel and squirming in flush-cheeked embarrassment at her own imagination. It was, for any observers who happened to be present, a rather disturbing scene to witness.

"All right. I'm told the tents are up, so we can go change into our swimsuits there. Come with me, Miss Mia. Being the good friend that I am, I made sure to bring one for you as well."

"...Huh?" The statement shattered her amorous reverie, sending her tumbling back down to reality. "Wait... *You* brought a swimsuit for me?"

I have a bad feeling about this.

A number of provisional tents had been quickly set up some distance from the beach. Four girls were present at the camp: Mia and Esmeralda, and their maids, Anne and Nina. Despite having had a bad feeling after hearing Esmeralda had brought a swimsuit for her, Mia decided to comply, figuring it couldn't hurt to try it on...

"Sweet moons! How terribly indecent!" she exclaimed in horror after seeing herself in the garment. "This swimsuit leaves my middle bared!"

As it turns out, the swimsuit Esmeralda had selected for her consisted of two separate pieces, one upper and one lower, which left the soft peachy skin of her tummy and her dainty little belly button entirely exposed!

Now, for those wondering about the issue of F.A.T.... Mia had, in fact, managed to reverse its progression, bringing her figure back to the state it had been at the beginning of spring. Her efforts had not betrayed her. All her diligent watering (with a nutritious solution of ninety percent sweat and ten percent tears) had paid off,

bearing fruit in the form of a reasonably flat contour along her midriff.

The swimsuit Mia had brought herself went down to just above her knees, but the one from Esmeralda ended halfway up her thighs. This was most unacceptable!

"How can I be expected to wear such an embarrassing garment? It doesn't even come with a skirt!"

Indeed, Mia's own swimsuit included a short frilly skirt around the waist. Esmeralda's offering, in comparison, was shaped like a simple pair of shorts. To be fair, the shorts weren't any more revealing than the skirt, nor were they much different from the kind Mia would wear when engaged in outdoor activities. How she looked though, wasn't nearly as important as how she *felt*. And she felt terribly indecent in Esmeralda's choice. To Mia, a swimsuit was like waterproof lingerie. They were aquatic underwear. Walking around in them without a skirt was simply unthinkable!

"It's obscene! I refuse to wear these!" she declared with indignance.

Esmeralda eyed her dubiously. "Really? And you'd rather have that skirt flapping around you in the water? I suspect it'll make it terribly difficult to swim."

Of course, when it came to swimming, the less resistance the better. The swimsuit Esmeralda brought was designed with performance in mind, employing skin-tight contours while incorporating fish skin into its outer layer to minimize drag. She was actually taking the whole "swimming lessons" thing pretty seriously, and she intended to give her pupil every advantage. Naturally, she'd selected the best swimsuit she could find for Mia. And made sure its colors matched her own, though that wasn't so much a pedagogic choice as a personal fixation.

"W-Well, even so, I can't be wearing something so immodest with the two princes watching. For today at least, I'll wear my own swimsuit!"

Esmeralda wilted a little.

"If you say so..." she said with a hint of disappointment. "In that case, I suppose I'll change into the ones I usually wear too."

She proceeded to produce a swimsuit that...had a perfectly modest design! There was plenty of fabric to cover the whole of the midriff, and it even had a frilly skirt like Mia's! Basically, she didn't have the guts to wear a revealing one by herself, and seeing that

Mia was going with a conservative design, she immediately wimped out as well. The two of them were, in fact, chickens of a feather.

"I mean, after all, no one told me there'd be two princes coming. Not that I'm uncomfortable showing them some extra skin or anything. That'd be childish. But, well, it's never good to rush these things. Might as well take some extra time and do some mental preparation. Right, Ni— Ahem. Maid, don't you think so?"

At her question, Nina eyed her from head to toe and back. The maid's gaze then wandered, growing distant, before she slowly answered with a nod, "Yes, I do believe that would be wise."

Chapter 31: Loyal Subjects Behind the Scenes

Ganudos Port Country was a small nation comprising a capital city and a number of small fishing villages. It had what could arguably be called a royal family, but there was no noble class. In its place existed a number of guilds, whose heads formed the parliament and senate. Among them, the shipping and shipwright guilds were some of the largest and had deep ties with the House of Greenmoon. Ludwig therefore skirted them, choosing to contact the senators from other guilds instead. However...

"You put me in a difficult position, Mr. Ludwig. Such matters should go through the Duke of Greenmoon first."

His results left much to be desired. They hadn't turned him away at the door, but none showed any enthusiasm for his suggestions.

Well, as a diplomat, I sure underperformed... He pursed his lips. Something gnawed at the back of his mind. *Then again, did I underperform...or was I made to—*

"So, how'd it go?" asked Vanos as Ludwig stepped out from the master's chamber.

"Like talking to a stone wall," he answered with a wry shrug as they walked down the manor's hall toward the front door.

He was well aware of the Greenmoons' influence and had taken care to speak only with those who had minimal dealings with the Duke. There should have been plenty of room for negotiation with these people, but he barely managed to get a conversation started with the majority of them, never mind talk serious business.

"Not going well, is it? Guess the Duke of Greenmoon holds a lot of sway round these parts," muttered Vanos before a frown appeared across his brow. "Gotta say though... Somethin' about this whole thing smells fishy."

"Does it now?" Ludwig stopped, propped up his glasses, and looked Vanos in the eye. "Good. So I'm not the only one who thinks

so. And we have every reason to suspect foul play, considering we're here on Her Highness's orders. Not here on official business, perhaps, but it doesn't change the fact that we are known to speak on her behalf. This tight-lipped attitude of theirs might work against a small-time noble, but doing it to an emissary of the Princess of Tearmoon is, very literally, a royal affront. The fact that they're willing to adopt this approach is...intriguing, to say the least."

As one of the empire's four pillars, the House of Greenmoon possessed such power through both coin and sword that any small nation would undoubtedly think twice about crossing them. The same, however, could undoubtedly be said of Mia. As the Emperor's daughter, her influence was immeasurable. Even if they secretly thought ill of her, it was common sense to at least maintain an amicable front. Somehow, that logic was currently lost on them...which was a phenomenon that Ludwig found rather curious.

"...Intriguing, but not unthinkable," he then amended.

"Oh yeah? Why's that?"

"Conservative politicians," he said with a shrug. "Those who profit from the status quo have no desire to change it. If they're benefiting from dealing with the Duke of Greenmoon, it's hardly surprising that they'd prefer to keep things the way they are. Then along we come trying to rock the boat. They'd obviously want to avoid talking to us for fear of angering the Duke. With that said..."

"Yeah?"

"The extent of their reluctance is unnatural. I was expecting pushback, but not this much. They can't all be this stupid. Surely, some of them understand the risks of making the Greenmoons their sole liaison with the empire."

Currently, Ganudos's ties with Tearmoon were entirely reliant on the Greenmoons, who could theoretically sever them on a whim. Diplomatically, this was an unstable arrangement, wholly disadvantageous to Ganudos. The Greenmoons could easily bully them into one-sided agreements, and Ludwig had no doubt they'd done so plenty of times.

"Considering how valuable a trading partner the empire is for Ganudos, and the fact that they're at the mercy of Greenmoon's whims, I'd expected a little more enthusiasm for establishing new channels of communication... It's most peculiar." He closed his eyes and pressed a thumb to his chin. "This...isn't about trade then? The

status quo...and the profits therein... Maybe that's not what concerns them? What is there to gain from having the Greenmoons handle all their trade?"

He mumbled to himself for a while. Eventually, he shook his head.

"This isn't working. I need...a fresh perspective. Some sort of paradigm shift in my thinking."

He began walking again. Vanos gave him a curious look and followed a few steps behind.

"So, where're we headed? Back to the inn to prepare for tomorrow?"

"No. If we try the same approach, it'll just be a repeat of today. Instead... Hm... Well, in any case, I think it's time to ask around a little. More information never hurts. Where are the rest of the Princess Guard?"

Counting Vanos, thirty men of the Princess Guard had accompanied Mia to the port country. Two had gone on the cruise with her, leaving twenty eight in town.

"I've got them all resting at the inn. Don't worry though. You've got me. If you need to go somewhere, I'll be right there guarding you every step of the way."

The big man pounded his chest. Ludwig smiled reluctantly.

"I certainly appreciate the company. Sorry to force this on you. By all rights, you should be resting with the others as well. We're in the capital, after all. I doubt anything will happen to us here."

"Didn't Her Highness tell Dion to get here too, though?" Vanos scratched his bearded chin. "Sounds to me like we oughta keep our eyes open. You're an important person. Her Highness needs you, and it's not like there's more of you to spare."

"Perhaps... But I believe the same applies to you as well. And Sir Dion. And each and every one of her guards. Her Highness likely deems you all equally important and irreplaceable." Ludwig eyed Vanos and smirked. "Though I suspect this is old news to you."

"Is it now? Hah! I guess it is! I swear, our princess is an odd one. She's got a way of making you feel good about working for her," Vanos said with a rolling bout of laughter.

Chapter 32: Mia “Waning Aurelia” Tearmoon

After finally changing into her swimsuit, a fidgety Mia emerged from the tent. Waiting for her outside were Abel and Sion, both already in swimming trunks with their chests bared. Their muscles, though still slender with youth, were firmly toned—the result of all their sword practice. It was the kind of sight that normally would have made Mia drool, but at the moment, she was too occupied with her own anxiety. Squirming on the spot with her eyes on her toes, she timidly flashed them an upward glance and asked, “How...do I look? Do you think it suits me?”

An icon of fashion...she was not. Her one-piece swimsuit went all the way down to her knees, and a ring of fabric hung from her waist in the shape of a skirt. The top half was like a sleeveless shirt, exposing her collarbones, shoulders, and a tender pair of upper arms—in other words, none of the bits that mattered. The designs clashed a little, and it was honestly rather unstylish.

Basically, it was the same as the dress she’d worn to the evening ball, with an aesthetic that, to put it nicely, could be described as leaving a lot to the imagination. It was plain and unassuming. So much so that to feel embarrassed in it was laughable. Well, it should have been, at least, if anybody still had enough wits about them to laugh.

“Uh, yes, I... I think it does,” stammered Abel, who managed only a short glance before turning away to reveal a face thoroughly reddened with embarrassment. “Y-You look great. Sion, you think so too, right?”

Flustered, he promptly threw the metaphorical hot potato at Sion, who caught it with about the same amount of grace.

“R-Right. Yes. I agree. Suits you well,” he replied after a few hesitant glances, cheeks rosy and voice strained.

Indeed, these two princes could best grown men in duels, match decorated knights in valor, but could barely produce a coherent

sentence when Mia showed up in a swimsuit. They stood there awkwardly, as if stuck in place by some spell or enchantment. Maybe the magic of the summer beach had gotten to them. Something about the exotic scenery and seaside air, coupled with the sight of a familiar female classmate in unfamiliar attire, had twisted their sense of aesthetics, turning them into crazed beholders whose eyes saw beauty in every inch of her being. In that moment, it seemed as if her pearlescent skin shimmered with a radiance that formed a halo of saintly light around her figure.

Mia, rather pleased by their reaction, beamed.

"My! How nice of you to say so! Thank you. You've really made my day."

Having already beaten their composure to a pulp, she proceeded to go for the jugular. The two poor princes and their young hearts could do naught but succumb to her relentless and entirely unwitting assault.

After all the commotion surrounding the swimsuits finally died down, Mia promptly began her swimming lessons with Esmeralda.

"By the way, Miss Mia, are you able to submerge your face under water?"

Currently, Mia was standing in water that reached up to her waist.

"My, what an odd question. Are there people who can't?" she asked with casual indifference while studying a pair of goggles Esmeralda had lent her.

"Then why don't we start by having you put those on and practicing some floating? Follow my lead now. Raise your arms high like this. All the way so they're a little bit behind your head."

She obeyed, stretching her arms up as she was told.

"Yes, yes, just like that. Now imagine the sea is a soft bed, and you're going to fall into it. Watch me."

Esmeralda continued her demonstration. She threw herself forward into the water and landed in an exemplary front float. Nina, who was watching nearby, applauded.

"Marvelous, milady! Your form is as beautiful as the mermaid princess of legend."

Her spectating guards followed suit, clapping their hands in approval.

"Marvelous! Marvelous! Lady Esmeralda is marvelous!" they

chanted in unison.

Amidst thunderous applause, Esmeralda leapt to her feet with a flourish, flicking sparkling droplets of water out of her long hair. She turned to Mia.

"Just like that. Make sure you kick out your legs and keep them straight. Go ahead. Give it a try."

"Hmhm, this is a piece of cake!"

With complete confidence, Mia eagerly threw herself into the water and unveiled the grand exhibit of her maiden front float. Eyes widened, jaws dropped, and all who were present were struck with utter amazement at just how...*underwhelming* it was. Even Anne couldn't help but gawk for a moment before gathering herself and commending the effort with applause a tad too enthusiastic to be entirely genuine. Scattered clapping arose from the crowd, following in her example out of propriety. Eventually, Mia righted herself with a splash and looked up at the audience with a bright, expectant smile.

"How was it? Did I also look as beautiful as the mermaid princess?"

Her question prompted a round of uncomfortable glances. Seeing that no one was answering, her gaze naturally shifted toward the two princes. Having fallen under her spell, they'd witnessed her attempt through clouded eyes, their opinions of its aesthetic quality thoroughly distorted.

"U-Uh, it was, erm..."

"Well, I mean..."

There was an awkward pause, during which they both looked away before stammering their responses. Turns out, even the full influence of her seductress aura wasn't enough to blind the princes' to the awkwardness of her front float. It was *that* bad. How bad, you ask? Well, her body, instead of drawing a straight line parallel to the water's surface, traced a bulbous curve. Imagine the shape of a bow with its string at the bottom and the body arcing above. Her hands and feet formed the ends, while her protruding rear served as the central hump. Her lopsided form, along with the way she drifted limply on the waves, was reminiscent of a jellyfish—a moon jellyfish, specifically—and might have earned her the nickname "Waning Aurelia." Poetic, perhaps, but still clear in its implications.

Alas, neither prince had the heart to tell the truth to her face. The pair, who'd faced the bone-splitting swings of each other's

swords without flinching, nevertheless found that their steely nerves had evaporated, leaving them floundering for a response.

"It was, uh...good. D-Don't you think, Sion?" asked Abel with a pleading glance.

"Y-Yes. Of course. I mean, you're a princess, and it...wasn't completely unlike a mermaid, right?" Sion stammered, turning to Keithwood in a rare display of flustered desperation.

Keithwood, ever the gentleman, took the task in stride. With an easy smile, he inclined his head and said, "Absolutely. You were such a dazzling sight, Princess Mia, that I thought my eyes were going to melt on the spot." Then, after delivering that ostensible compliment, he leaned in, placing his head between those of the two tongue-tied princes, and whispered, "To lie is immoral, but a white lie, especially one to please a lady, will earn its own redemption." With his wealth of experience, Keithwood navigated the waters of the Waning Aurelia with far more grace than the still-innocent Sion and Abel could muster.

There was, however, one person who didn't continue the fib. One person who had the moral resolve to say nay.

"Miss Mia, that was absolutely unacceptable."

That person was Esmeralda, and she was bubbling with anger. The princess she considered her worthy rival—her dear friend and sister in spirit if not body—was *not* going to have "Waning Aurelia" as a middle name. It was shameful, and she would not stand for it. Never mind that she was the one who'd spent the better part of the cruise trying to humiliate Mia before her peers. They were, perhaps, more sisterly than they might appear; their memories shared similar unreliabilities, at least.

"Allowing your legs to sink pulls the whole body down. Try pushing your head deeper down into the water."

When it came to teaching Mia how to swim, Esmeralda had no intention of cutting corners. In other words, she was in serious mode. Mia, meanwhile...

"My, I see! What else was I doing wrong then?"

Was also in serious mode! She met Esmeralda's gaze, her eyes alight with equal resolve. And for good reason, since she already knew she'd fall into the sea at some point in the future. Being thrown into the water by an overturned raft had lit a fire under her. For the sake of safely surviving her watery encounter, she was determined to do whatever it took to learn how to swim.

The day turned into an intense training session with Esmeralda's passionate coaching finding great resonance in Mia's thirst to improve. By the end, Mia had mastered not only the front float and flutter kick, but even the ability to lie flat on her back with her face out of the water as if she were about to perform the backstroke.

"Huh... If I can float on my back, then I don't really have to learn any complicated breathing techniques, do I? I can just breathe normally... Doesn't this mean I'm safe from drowning?"

Such profound thoughts went through her head as she continued to practice her floating, like a Waning Aurelia drifting through the sea.

Chapter 33: Princess Mia... Tells a Doozy of a Spooky Story

The burning wood crackled and popped. A gentle breeze fanned the enormous bonfire, causing it to illuminate the surrounding beach in a flickering orange light. Mia sat on a blanket spread across the sand, arms around her knees as she stared into the empty air, eyes glassy with fatigue. Her noontime training session had robbed her of all stamina, and it was all she could do to keep her eyelids from closing. Even if they did though, it would be all right; she'd already done everything she needed to do. She'd bathed in the sea and enjoyed a fine dinner that lived up to the Greenmoons' fine reputation. Body clean and stomach full, all that remained was to crawl into a tent they'd set up a little ways from shore and sleep. There was, however, something about this brief period between wakefulness and slumber that stayed her feet. Shadows danced amidst the wavering glow of the flame. The atmosphere was peaceful and a little hypnotizing.

How magical... she thought before letting out a yawn. *Still, I think I'm at my limit. Time to snooze...*

Just as she was about to stand, Esmeralda's voice pierced the quiet ambience.

"Now then... I think it's time to begin," she said in a low, hushed voice.

"Begin? Hm? Begin what?"

Mia glanced at her, one eyelid raised halfway. Esmeralda nodded, the motion slow and deliberate, before her lips spread in a sinister grin.

"Telling spooky stories, of course."

"...Eh?"

"Look around you. Campfire. Summer night. Vacation on a deserted island. What else would we possibly do?"

"My, I didn't think you'd enjoy such silly activities!" The suggestion had caught Mia off guard. She looked out across the

darkening sea, then glanced at the rustling leaves of the forest. The creepy atmosphere made it seem like strange monsters might be hiding in the shadows just out of view. Mia, of course, didn't believe in ghosts and monsters, so she wasn't scared.

I'm not scared at all. In fact, this is all very silly. Spooky stories? Hmph, only children enjoy telling spooky stories! I don't mind listening, of course. I can listen all night. But I wouldn't want people to lump me together with her and assume I'm actually enjoying it. Maybe I should voice some opposition to this idea? A lot of opposition, even.

Ignoring what seemed very much like a nervous twitch in her cheek, she put on a smile.

"Wh-Why, you're like a child, Esmeralda, getting so worked up about something like that."

"My, Miss Mia, don't tell me... Are you scared?"

"S-S-Scared? Who, me? I'm not scared."

"Then there's no problem, right? Feel free to listen along and amuse yourself with our childish stories."

"But— Hnnnngh..."

She barely lasted three sentences before Esmeralda checkmated her.

"As the one who proposed the idea, I'll start us off with an extra spooky one—"

"Hold it, Esmeralda," she hurriedly said.

Judging by how eager she is, she must really like scary stories... Chances are, she's probably heard tons of really spooky ones from her classmates. Who can sleep after hearing something like that? Not Anne, at least! I'm worried about Anne!

Esmeralda had been rather hostile toward Anne on the yacht. This was surely a continuation of her attempt to terrorize the poor girl. In an act of altruism, Mia boldly resolved to shield her loyal maid from further torment. It was definitely altruistic and not at all because she was scared to hear the story.

The problem is...who do I call on? Mia looked at each of the other faces in turn. *Sion...is an all-around overachiever, so he's probably good at telling spooky scares too. Keithwood... Hmph, he's got the kind of face that attracts girls. If they've asked him to tell stories like these before, then there's a good chance he'll have had plenty of practice. As for Abel... He might know some creepy folktales from Remno or something.*

The thing about spooky stories was that they often followed

patterns. The more predictable a story, the less scary it was. A strange story from a foreign land though... That was a whole new level of scary. There was no way she'd get any sleep after hearing something like that.

Anne, that is. Anne wouldn't get any sleep. And considering what he did on the boat, Abel definitely has a mischievous side. If something flips his switch, he might try extra hard to scare us and tell an extra *scary story. He's definitely a risky card to play!*

That left her with only one option.

"If I may be so bold, I'd like to tell the first story."

Her plan was exceedingly simple. She was going to come up with a story that took a long time to tell, thereby reducing the amount of time everyone else had. Since it was her story, she wouldn't be scared. By she, she meant Anne, of course. It did occur to her that her logic was *maybe* starting to fray at this point, but she chose not to sweat the small stuff. The big picture was what mattered.

What should I do though? I don't really listen to spooky stories... Not because I'm scared. It's because a lot of them are silly...

After a period of contemplation, she began to speak in a soft voice...

"This is a story...about a princess who died at the guillotine."

...about her own experiences!

She recounted her past life, adding some embellishments here and there for effect. Since the point was to take up a lot of time, she fervently searched through the deepest recesses of her memory, digging up story after story as she tried to weave them all into a long and reasonably coherent narrative. She went on and on, describing the headless ghost that appeared in the castle and the tale it told, the bloody diary it left behind, the dread and agony leading up to the day of the guillotine, and the despair of that terrible instant when the iron blade fell... She told it with flair, her voice mournful in one moment and spine-chilling the next. As she spoke, the expressions of the others began to grow strained.

Hm? Am I actually scaring them with my story? Oho. Well then...

The fear in their faces caused something in her to stir. It was a sense of excitement. Scaring people, she realized, was actually kind of thrilling. She continued her story with heightened passion, voice intense and motions more dramatic. The stage was hers, and she was on a roll. On and on she went, talking and gesturing to the

increasing horror of her audience.

She finished to the sound of crickets. The crowd was dead silent.

Wow, they're scared stiff. My story must have been really spooky...

Clearly, it was a job well done. She was feeling pretty good about herself until she received her first comment.

"The way you told that... It was as if you had firsthand experience... Especially the guillotine part..."

It came from Sion, and it pulled her out of her self-satisfied reverie. She took another look at her audience's faces and realized that she'd made a terrible mistake. They weren't scared of her story. They were scared of *her*! Because her hyperrealistic description of the guillotine was creeping them out! It was unnervingly visceral, detailing everything from the smells and sounds of the crowd gathered to watch the execution to the sensation of the blade slicing into her neck. Her words had an uncanny veracity, too real—too *gruesome*—for the delicate psyches of her genteel friends.

"W-Well, we all know how much Miss Mia likes her tall tales. I suppose it makes sense for her to also have, uh...a very colorful imagination."

In the end, it was Esmeralda who came to the rescue, offering everyone an explanation that didn't require them to start harboring serious doubts about Mia's sanity.

Keithwood pursed his lips as he tried to make sense of Mia's rambling narrative. He'd been listening in as he tended to some final preparations for the night. At first, he wasn't sure what to make of it. For a spooky story, it wasn't particularly spooky. Or, for that matter, much of a story. After some consideration, it clicked.

Aaah, I see what the princess is doing. This is a cautionary tale. She's delivering a subtle admonishment of Lady Esmeralda's behavior under the guise of a campfire story.

Criticism has a better chance of permeating the mental barriers of the close-minded when framed as a story. It was an effective method, frequently employed by the Central Orthodox Church's priests. Even Rafina made use of parables when preaching the teachings of God, and Mia clearly wasn't above a little mimicry as a means to an end. It made perfect sense, especially considering the essence of Mia's character (as understood by Keithwood) was a stubborn refusal to abandon others to their flaws. She both believed

in their potential to be better people and tried to help them realize it. Given that Esmeralda was her friend, she could hardly turn a blind eye to her behavior.

And so she went and cooked up this whole story about an arrogant princess and her foolish ways. The moral's pretty simple. Don't ignore your people, or you'll end up like her one day. I have to admit though, she ripped into that princess pretty hard, what with the whole "If there's no bread, then let them eat cake" line. Even Esmeralda isn't clueless enough to blurt out something like that. I guess she did balance things out a little by making the girl put in an honest effort to fix things after her empire started collapsing. It's good narrative practice to imbue your characters with at least a couple virtues...

His interest now fully piqued, he glanced at the story's intended protagonist.

The problem, then, is whether Esmeralda will realize this story's about her.

The person in question proceeded to leap eagerly to her feet.

"All right, I'm next! Now, as for my story..." Esmeralda said as she pressed a hand to her chest and grinned. "Allow me to tell a humble tale about an island...and the horrors said to haunt it."

Chuckling to himself, Keithwood shook his head. Mia's attempt, it seemed, had failed to achieve its intended result.

Meanwhile, Mia was resisting the urge to pull at her hair in frustration. Her attempt had indeed failed to achieve its intended result, albeit a different one than what Keithwood presumed. She'd paced her story poorly, ending too early to prevent Esmeralda from telling hers.

Ugh, I just made a terrible mistake...

There was, however, no longer anything she could do. Esmeralda began with a flourish.

"This is an old Ganudos folktale, told and retold by its people...and it's about the ghosts of cultists that roam the land..." She lowered her voice, adopting an ominous tone for narration. "Long long ago, long before our empire was built, there was a cult driven out of their homeland, which lay somewhere across the sea. As they fled their pursuers, hating both their country and its people, they happened upon a deserted island and went into hiding. It was an island just like the one we're on right now, and there they bided their time, swearing to one day return to their country to take

revenge upon those they hated. To fuel their malice, they even built a secret underground shrine to worship the Archdaemon. But…"

She paused. Only after looking at the faces of each audience member in turn did she continue.

"They never made it back. The cultists perished there, leaving only their bitter hatred behind. Some say that their ghosts, vengeful and malevolent, roam the island to this day. And that island…might be the very one we're on right now."

The wind whistled, almost like a woeful moan. Fueled by this gust, the fire roared, throwing angry sparks into the air.

"Eeek!"

Mia flinched back with a gasp. Then, ever so quietly, she reached behind her and grabbed the hem of Anne's skirt. It was, of course, an act of kindness, done out of concern for her maid. Anne, noticing the tug, gently pressed her hand over Mia's.

"It looks like the wind's picking up," said Abel, a hint of apprehension creeping into his voice.

The faces of their guards were also clouded with worry as they glanced around.

"At this rate, it'll be a stormy night out at sea too," said Sion. "Is your yacht going to be all right?"

"There is no need for concern, Prince Sion. It'll take more than a little wind to sink that vessel. I've also made sure to employ a very experienced captain. Everything will be fine," replied Esmeralda with supreme confidence.

Chapter 34: Esmeralda Screws Up

Sleep eluded Mia that night. The makeshift walls of her tent rustled ceaselessly in the wind. Every once in a while, leaves would scrape against it, the sound like claws dragging across the fabric. At times, she could almost hear something in the whistling gusts...a low rumble...or perhaps a ghostly moan. It kicked her imagination into an unfortunate overdrive. Thought after frightening thought flashed through her mind, and she spent a good hour tossing and turning in her sleeping bag until finally settling into an uneasy slumber. That, combined with the fact that she'd retired an hour earlier than usual due to fatigue from the day's activities meant that...she fell asleep at pretty much the same time she always did.

Anyway, she endured a difficult night before waking to the shrill sound of even stronger winds the next morning. The violent creaking of tent poles made her leap to her feet, her eyes wide and alert.

"Wh-What in the moons is going on?!"

A quick survey of her surroundings revealed that Esmeralda and Nina were nowhere to be found. The only person still waiting for her was Anne. For a bit of added context, it bears mentioning that the winds had picked up long before Mia began to stir. In other words, the noise had quickly woken everyone except Mia, who continued to snooze happily through the windy rustling, and none of them had the heart to disturb her slumber.

"Good morning, milady. I'm sorry to disturb you so early in the morning, but something seems to be wrong. We should get you changed and join the others as quickly as possible."

"All right, help me with these then."

With Anne's help, she hastily slipped on her outerwear and stepped out of the tent...only to be blown off her feet by a blast of wind. She was saved from a painful stumble by Anne's timely intervention and managed to right herself with some effort.

"This is *some* wind..."

They'd made camp on a patch of high ground some distance

from the shore. A number of large trees that grew around the perimeter had served as anchors for their tents, but even their stout branches—some as thick as the pillars in a castle—were groaning loudly from the windy assault. Thick, gray clouds moved at a dizzying pace overhead. There was no rain, but in the distance, blinding white streaks flashed intermittently, linking sea to sky. It was all very unsettling, as if the world itself was coming apart.

"Miss Mia! We have a problem! Ooooh, we have a problem!"

Esmeralda appeared, dashing toward her with the look of someone who'd seen a ghost.

"My, what's gotten you so worked up?" asked Mia, cocking an eyebrow at her friend's pale-faced panic.

Her calm demeanor lasted all of three seconds—exactly until she heard Esmeralda's next words.

"It's gone... The Emerald Star is gone!"

"...Eh?"

Mia stared agape, her brain struggling to process the implications of the statement.

Esmeralda led the way down to the shore. Mia trailed behind her, slack-jawed at the sight of a beach entirely unrecognizable from the one she saw the day before. The shoreline was much closer now, and waves pounded violently against it. Less than a third of the sandy beach remained unsubmerged. Most worryingly, the Emerald Star, instead of floating off the coast in the spot she remembered, had vanished without a trace.

"It... It couldn't have been pirates, could it?" whispered Esmeralda, voice thick with fear.

"I doubt it. The Star's crew probably went looking for a lee to shelter from this storm." Keithwood strolled up, speaking in a cool, composed tone. He narrowed his eyes at the sky where dark clouds were beginning to swirl. "I had my concerns yesterday, and it looks like I was right. We're in for a tempest."

"Whatever happens, it's dangerous for us to stay here. We should start looking for a place where we can hide from the storm," Sion urged.

Keithwood and Abel nodded at the suggestion.

"Miss Esmeralda, do you know of any safe spots on this island? A cave, even, would be useful right now."

"I, um... No, I only know my way around this beach..."

Sion's lips drew into a line.

"I see. So none of us know what lies on this island beyond the shore."

"Milord, I recommend forming a reconnaissance party. We can perhaps ask Princess Mia or Lady Esmeralda for some of their guards. Or I can go myself."

"No, splitting up right now is too risky. If we move, we move together," Sion declared with finality before frowning and looking around. "Speaking of which...where *are* the guards? Mia, where did you send your people?"

Only then did Mia realize that the two members of the Princess Guard, who were supposed to be protecting her around the clock, were nowhere to be found. Esmeralda's retinue, likewise, were also gone. That meant their group had been reduced to only seven people: the two princes, Keithwood, and Mia and Esmeralda along with their maids, Anne and Nina. Somehow, every last one of their guards had disappeared into thin air!

What in the moons is happening right now?

Esmeralda's creepy tale reappeared in Mia's mind. She remembered how, after talking about the ghosts roaming the island, she'd gleefully moved on to further horrors...like an empty ship found at sea, passengers mysteriously vanished into thin air... A chill ran down her spine, making her shudder. The process of shuddering shifted her gaze just enough for her to notice Esmeralda fidgeting with her hands. She frowned, looking her up and down. There was a strange uneasiness about her. After a moment, Mia's eyes lit up with comprehension.

"...Esmeralda, this was your doing, wasn't it?"

She eyed her questioningly.

"M-My doing? Wh-Whatever do you mean? I have no idea what you're talking about," she said with blatantly feigned ignorance.

Mia took a few menacing steps toward her. She backed away sheepishly.

"Don't play dumb with me. You sent your guards back to the boat last night, didn't you? And you even managed to talk my guards into following them..."

"Th-Th-That's not true! Wh-Why would I possibly do something like that?"

Mia deigned no reply. She simply glared. And glared. And glared. Eventually, Esmeralda broke.

“Hnnngh, w-well, I... I thought you might want some privacy...so you can have some, you know, intimate conversations you wouldn’t want the guards overhearing. And if not you, then maybe one of the princes might appreciate it. It’s a reasonable thing to do. I was being considerate.”

In summary, she kept Nina and Anne around to help with personal needs, but she shooed away the guards, figuring they’d be a nuisance if Mia and Abel wanted to take things to the next level, so to speak. Which was definitely none of Esmeralda’s business, but she had decided to insert herself nonetheless.

And that’s not all... thought Mia as she studied Esmeralda’s face. *This is about her too. I bet she was thinking “This way, maybe Prince Sion will be tempted to come chat with me too.” I swear, this girl...* She shook her head. *When is she going to get her head out of the clouds? Sion? Approaching her? Please.*

With utter derision, she dismissed Esmeralda’s fanciful hopes of romance. Not that she was one to talk, considering her behavior in the previous timeline, but again, something something memory horizons, something something stone’s throw away.

“Shelter first, talk later. Keithwood, take the lead.”

At Sion’s urging, the group began moving.

Chapter 35: Last of the Four - The Oldest and Weakest Duke

Ludwig meandered through the marketplaces and stores of Ganudos's capital, asking after and listening to all kinds of gossip. By the time he returned to his inn, the sun had already set, and he took a seat in the adjoining eatery to order a late supper. Vanos, who'd followed him around the whole day, sat down across from him and promptly gestured to a server for some liquor. Not long after, the big man's brows furrowed in thought.

"...You think Her Highness is enjoying herself out there?"

"Hm? Is there some reason to assume she might not be?"

"Well, I don't know, but the men she took with her are a little, you know... Oh, don't take this the wrong way. Their skill with the sword is top-notch. Whipped into shape by Captain Dion himself. If things get physical, they'll prove their worth, no doubt about it. Bandits are no problem. Hell, if it comes to it, the pair of them can even wipe the floor with that whole retinue of Greenmoon guards. Her Highness's safety is in good hands."

Ludwig nodded, recalling the faces of the new recruits to the Princess Guard. To a man, they looked like thugs and brigands, but at the same time, they undeniably bolstered the Guard's prowess in battle.

"Their loyalty to the empire is maybe a little suspect," Vanos continued, "but they know they owe Her Highness a big one. They'll gladly take an arrow for her. There's no question about that. Thing is..." He smiled awkwardly and scratched his head. "They're a rowdy bunch, and they love their alcohol. It, uh, can be a little hard to take an arrow for someone when you have trouble walking in a straight line."

In other words, they came with a disclaimer. Satisfaction guaranteed—only when sober.

"I see." After a moment's contemplation, Ludwig shrugged. "Either way, it's out of our hands now. Fretting about it would be

an exercise in futility. Her Highness is accompanied by her two princely classmates, who I hear are fine swordsmen in their own right, and the attendant Keithwood is with them as well. I think it's best if we left it up to them and focused on the things we can accomplish here." His expression grew more serious. "Let's review what we learned today. The information we gained is admittedly incomplete, gleaned from gossip in a hurried tour through the city, but it does give me the impression that the Greenmoons are not viewed in a very favorable light here."

"You're right about that. Doesn't seem like they're making an effort to improve their image either. Hell, people here actually have a better impression of Her Highness than the Duke," agreed Vanos, nodding with crossed arms.

"And in spite of that, they still funnel all their trade through the Greenmoons. Even if some of the country's higher-ups are receiving kickbacks, the sheer scale of the monopoly is unnatural."

The Duke of Greenmoon couldn't possibly be rich enough to bribe the entire upper echelon of Ganudos's government. What was behind their stranglehold on trade then?

"You sirs are from across the Galilea Sea?"

They looked up. The voice came from the place's owner. He was an old man with a slightly crooked back. His experience was obvious in the way his hands flew across the counter and grill.

"No, we're from Tearmoon."

"Ah, Tearmoon. You know anything about the Duke of Yellowmoon then? How's he and his people doing?"

Ludwig raised an eyebrow at the owner's question.

"Hm? Do you mean...the Duke of Greenmoon? If so, he's—"

"No, no, I said yellow. I can still tell my colors apart, thank you very much. The Yellowmoons. How're they doing? I heard from my grandma— back when she was still around, mind you—that they've been good friends to our country for a long long time. Gave us a lot of help over the ages. But at some point, they stopped talking to us. Just like that. Been worried about them ever since."

"The Yellowmoons, you say... Well, as far as I know, the Duke is in good health. And...his daughter is attending school at Saint-Noel Academy..." Ludwig said, his response guarded.

The owner's question baffled him. He'd never heard of any connection between the Yellowmoons and Ganudos. It hadn't come up during their walk through the city either. After further

conversation with the owner, he fell into silent contemplation. Vanos mulled over the unexpected discovery as well, albeit more audibly.

"...Things are getting real weird. The Yellowmoons, oldest and weakest of the Etoilers... Didn't expect to hear their name here... What's the deal?" he muttered. After a while, he shrugged. "Well, that's why I'm not hired for my brains, I guess."

He promptly downed his cup of liquor, sighed in pleasure as the piquant smell of alcohol rose up his nose, and started in on a dish of seafood the server brought. Ganudos was known for its fresh fish, and a local delicacy was to serve it raw. He placed a piece into his mouth and savored its texture, so tender that the fat melted on his tongue.

"So good... Gotta say, this job has some serious perks."

He reached for another piece but stopped when he noticed that Ludwig, brow still furrowed, hadn't taken a single bite of his food.

"What's bothering you so much?"

"Good question... Sir Vanos, how much do you know about our empire's beginnings?"

"Not much. Don't know much about history in general."

"Let me fill you in a little then. There was a region of land called the Fertile Crescent, and at first, it was inhabited by an agrarian tribe. A society of farmers. Later, they were invaded by a powerful tribe of hunters, who conquered their land and subjugated their people. This acquisition of land and serfs by the hunters is widely considered the beginning of the empire."

It was the prevailing consensus in Tearmoon, but after reciting this piece of common knowledge, Ludwig lowered his gaze and spoke in a more thoughtful tone.

"However... There is another theory, and it posits that our ancestors came from across the sea. This theory isn't entirely without merit, and while not perfect, enough evidence exists to suggest that at least a part of the current population traces its roots to a land beyond the Galilea Sea."

"Huh. All right, I follow you, but I don't see the point of this story. What's it got to do with anything?" asked Vanos, puzzled.

"Think about it. If they crossed the sea to get here..." said Ludwig, leaning forward. "What path would they have taken? To go from the Galilea Sea to the Fertile Crescent that the imperial capital currently rests upon, where would they have to pass through?"

“Ah, I get you.” Vanos tapped on the table with one finger. “You mean here, don’t you? These ancestors of ours would have had to pass through Ganudos.”

“Exactly. Of course, at the time, this place wouldn’t have been a country yet. It’s said that the Tearmoon Empire and Ganudos Port Country were founded at about the same time. However, if the theory is true, we should assume that the two had ties from the very beginning. Then, if we were to further assume that it was the Yellowmoons, the so-called oldest and weakest of the Four Houses, who were put in charge of maintaining those ties...”

“Then, at some point, the Greenmoons stepped in and started handling all the negotiations by themselves. As time went on, it became natural, and people stopped asking questions. And finally, here we are now. You say Ganudos, and people think Greenmoon. Gotta admit, something about this does smell fishy.”

“We require more information. My apologies for taking so much of your time, Sir Vanos, but I’ll need you to come with me after my meeting with the senator tomorrow.”

“You think you’re on to something?”

“I’m not sure yet...” Ludwig crossed his arms and frowned. “But to my knowledge, those with malicious plans tend not to be the ones attracting a whole lot of attention on stage but the ones hiding quietly behind the curtains.”

“Hey, what a coincidence! That’s exactly what I’ve learned in my line of work,” Vanos said with a grin.

Ludwig couldn’t resist an amused snort. Then he shrugged.

“In any case, I have a strong feeling this country is hiding something about the Yellowmoons from us, and I intend to find out what. So, we’re going to investigate...”

“Investigate, huh? I bet it’s not gonna be easy to get ’em to cough up answers. You got a plan of some kind?”

“There are usually two places that archive this kind of information: the government and the Church. Since the government here isn’t trustworthy in this regard, we’re going to try the latter option.”

The following day, the two of them made their way to the local Central Orthodox Church.

Chapter 36: Tempest...

Drip... Drip... Splash!

Mia flinched and looked up just in time for another volley of hard raindrops to splatter against her face. What had begun moments ago as a drizzle was quickly turning into a downpour.

"Ow, stupid rain. Can you fall any harder?" she grumbled sarcastically.

The rain apparently heard her, because it proceeded to hammer them even more, turning the downpour into a full-on tempest, complete with thick clouds and howling winds. The deluge was so heavy it obscured their vision, making it feel like they were constantly walking through a thick curtain of water.

"Sweet moons, it's really coming down... And the wind is picking up..."

She wiped off her face with her hands futilely before looking around with a wry smile.

Well, I came to practice swimming, so I was prepared to get wet, but I sure didn't expect to spend my time on land soaked through as well.

Her waterlogged clothes had taken on an unfamiliar weight, and they stuck to her as she walked. It was a strange sensation, as if she were taking a shower while fully dressed. She imagined herself doing so, pretending she was engaging in some sort of bizarre cleansing ritual. The thought amused her, and she started to find the experience fun.

"Everyone, keep close to me. Whatever you do, don't get separated. Abel, can you keep your eyes behind us?"

"Leave it to me. I'll be our rear guard."

That simple exchange was all the two princes needed to figure out their roles. With Keithwood scouting out the path ahead, Sion walked at the front of the group. Behind him were, in order, Mia, Anne, Esmeralda, and Nina, with Abel bringing up the rear. They stayed in a straight line, proceeding quickly but cautiously toward the camp.

Mia kept her attention on her feet, treading with care to avoid

slipping on mud.

Squish... Squish... Squish...

Every step in her soggy shoes was accompanied by an unpleasant sound, made worse by the difficulty of traversing mucky ground. Time and again, she stumbled, catching herself only at the last second to avoid a nasty fall.

They heard their camp before seeing it. The wild fluttering of fabric was making an awful ruckus, and the tents shook so violently it looked like they were about to be carried off whole.

"Sweet moons! The tents!" exclaimed Esmeralda. "They'll be blown away! Quickly! We need to get our belongings out!"

Flustered, she started yelling at Nina to rescue their luggage. Sion put a hand out and stopped her.

"Bad idea. It's too dangerous."

"I agree," said Abel, walking up beside them. "Trying to move all our stuff in this wind is unrealistic. Finding shelter should come first."

"We need a place that's safe from the wind." Sion turned to Keithwood. "Can you find us one?"

"I'll have to, one way or another. Let's head for the island's center. Ladies, keep close."

With Keithwood leading the way, the group made their way further inland. After some time, they came upon a dense forest, its trees tall and their canopy thick. They walked in. The wind eased a little, but the pounding of raindrops on the leaves grew louder and more rapid.

Patter... Pitter patter pitter patter— Thump thump thump thump thump...

The drumming of rain, together with the furious rustling of leaves, drowned out the voices of her friends. For a brief moment, Mia was gripped by a sense of loneliness, as though the world had retreated, leaving only the deafening cacophony of the storm. She looked up. The dark blanket of foliage overhead stirred her memories.

After all this time, walking into a forest still reminds me of then...

When Mia was on the run, abandoned by her maid, she'd stumbled aimlessly through the forest by herself, desperately trying to evade capture by the revolutionary army.

That's right... We went into that forest, and almost immediately, I

tripped and hurt my leg. She took one look at me, told me I was deadweight, and ran off by herself...

Beads of rain rolled down her leg. The sensation was familiar, reminding her of the blood that had streamed down her scraped knee. The sharp stinging of the abrasion, the viscous warmth of her blood, it all came back to her, as vividly unpleasant as it had been that day. It was, perhaps, too vivid, commanding so much of her attention that she failed to keep her eyes on the ground ahead.

"Ah—"

Her foot slipped, and her body lurched forward. As she fell, she cursed her own carelessness.

Oh no... It's happening again... I'm going to hurt myself, and they'll think I'm deadweight...

"Look out!!"

The cry was followed by a burst of motion behind her. A split second later, someone caught her in their arms.

"M-Milady, are you all right?"

It took her a moment to gather herself. As she did, she realized she'd been pulled into a gentle embrace. Turning, she found herself face-to-face with a very worried Anne.

"Uh... Y-Yes. I'm quite fine."

She smiled. She felt odd doing so, considering their troubling circumstances, but it came too naturally to resist. There was a poignancy to her averted stumble. It juxtaposed her past self with her present, reminding her of what she'd been missing then...and what she had now. It surprised her to find how much the thought invigorated her.

"My, I need to pay more attention, don't I? The same goes for you too, Anne. Do watch your step," she said, turning around to catch up.

Just then, they heard Keithwood's voice through the curtain of rain.

"There's a cave up ahead. I suggest waiting out the storm there."

Apparently he'd gone off to scout the area.

"Good work!" said Sion as he turned toward the group. "All right, we're going to follow Keithwood. Stay close. Make sure we don't leave anyone behind."

Encouraged by this news, they steadily made their way deeper into the forest. After prying apart a dense thicket and forcing

themselves through, they discovered a large rock face covered in thick moss. At one spot where it met the ground was an opening that, amidst the smooth and unbroken surface, seemed a little out of place. The hole was just barely large enough to crawl through.

"It gets bigger inside. Come on now. Quickly."

She promptly followed Keithwood into the cavern.

It's almost like we're crawling into the belly of some enormous beast... Something about this place gives me the creeps...

Mia's gut feeling, which admittedly had a somewhat spotty track record, was in this case spot-on. Unbeknownst to them, they'd set foot in a place that had been lost to time...

Chapter 37: The Tables Have Turned! Abel Strikes Back!

Keithwood's words rang true. The cavern turned out to be far larger and deeper than its narrow opening suggested. The short tunnel that served as an entrance curved a little, creating a natural barrier against the wind. As the group proceeded further into the widening expanse, they found it surprisingly temperate inside. However...

"Milord," Keithwood whispered to Sion as they walked, "this cavern...there's something uncanny about it."

"Hm? What do you mean?"

"It's...unnatural. I can't say for certain, but this..." He pressed his palm to the wall of the cave, feeling its surface as he walked. "This doesn't look like the work of nature."

"...Should we expect unfriendly company?"

"Good question. This place doesn't exactly look lived in. I suspect any company we run into will probably be of the dead sort. Not exactly agreeable, but not dangerous either. Unless you trip over them."

Nothing about the cavern seemed recently disturbed, and there hadn't been even the semblance of a path leading here. Even if people had lived inside, they were probably ancient history by now.

"Assuming, of course," Keithwood added with a toothy grin, "they're not shambling around or see-through."

Sion gave him a level look before glancing backward.

"...Either way, we're better off inside. That storm is definitely our biggest concern right now. Still, some extra caution can't hurt. We *are* tasked with ensuring the safety of the Great Sage of the Empire, after all," he said, his gaze settling on Mia who, crouched near the entrance, was gingerly peeking over a rock at the violent weather outside.

"Agreed. Let's have a quick meeting so we can get everyone on the same page. Also, we should remind people to stay in groups at

all times. Solo activities are to be avoided."

The two of them continued to engage in serious discussion. Meanwhile, over by the cave entrance...

"It really came down, didn't it? I'm completely drenched." Mia wrung the hem of her shirt, and a stream of water gushed out, speaking to the sheer volume of rain they'd walked through. "Everything's dripping wet. I know it's summer, but I still feel like I might catch a cold."

"...Right. Hopefully not. Not catch a cold, I mean."

"...Mm?"

Abel's response had come a half second late and was a little incoherent. Her curiosity piqued, she eyed him and found him looking away, his cheeks a little too rosy to be entirely normal. Then she looked down at herself. Her clothes were stuck to her skin, revealing a vague glimpse of her underclothes. Suddenly, it all made sense.

My, my Abel. Is my current state a little too risqué for you? Am I making your heart flutter?

The thought flipped a switch in her head, and Seductress Mia took the reins. She grinned, her earlier reservation replaced by impish enthusiasm. In her mind, swimsuits were underwear that were worn in water. However conservative and unrevealing their design, they were still embarrassing to be seen in. Underwear was underwear, waterproof or not.

Conversely, right now, she was undeniably clothed. They'd gone translucent and her skin was showing, but by the same logic, outerwear was outerwear. So long as she was wearing that much, she felt no shame. Indeed, by the power of rationalization invested within her by her inner twenty-year-old, Mia could prance around in soggy clothes with utter confidence. Yes, Abel was developing a rather masculine frame that tugged at her eyeballs and made her heart go aflutter, but she still had the advantage of age. Mia was still the big sister in this relationship! So...

Mmhmhm, what an adorable reaction, Abel. I think I'm going to have some fun with you.

Teasing Master Mia moved to assert her dominance. She was a predator, ready to pounce on her helplessly callow prey. Armed with the confidence of a grown woman, she would toy with the young boy's innocence and savor his nervous naivety. She opened

her mouth, only for Abel to beat her to the punch.

"Excuse me for a moment."

He took off his thin coat and flung it around her. Then, ever so gently, he pulled it over her shoulders.

"...Eh?"

Her grown-woman confidence evaporated, taking with it the words she'd prepared for her opening jab. Mouth agape, she could but watch in shock as Abel went in for his follow-up strike.

"Your clothes, uh... They're showing through. Have been for a while. So, here. You can wear this. It's just as wet though. Sorry about that," he said, buttoning his coat over her with perfect gentlemanly grace before fixing her with a look of concern. "Honestly, Mia, you need to be more conscious of your own charms. Your skin, it's beautiful, but you really shouldn't go around showing it to everybody. It's...distracting. For me especially."

He then averted his gaze again, still obviously embarrassed. Mia countered with a second "Eh?" It was just as inept as the first. She gawked at the coatless Abel, upper body clad in only a shirt. The muscles under the short sleeves, toned through copious amounts of sword practice, showed through. Standing there with his arms crossed, he looked so strong...and gallant...and *dreamy*! Her chest tightened in spite of herself.

With his deft counter-stroke, Abel had bested Mia's big sister offensive. The tables had turned, and she was now at his mercy!

*Wh-Wh-What in the— Abel! You— Ooooh, what is the deal with you?! H-How can you just…*say *stuff like that?! Moons! You're so…so… Ugh!*

Red in the face and lips quivering, Mia couldn't help but squirm on the spot. Fortunately for her, Abel, having already gone to speak with Sion, didn't witness her embarrassment. That alone kept her from melting into a puddle of shame, but when she finally composed herself enough to think it through, she realized something else infuriating.

…Wait a minute. Did you just leave me by myself?! *After you casually toy with my emotions, you just* walk off*?! Wh-What am I supposed to do with all these pent-up feelings then?!*

Her yearning heart still fluttered, roused but denied its outlet. She fought the urge to scream in frustration. While she suffered, she heard Esmeralda's voice from further within the cavern.

"Oh? Is it getting damper or something? The temperature here feels a little different from the entrance. Hey, Ni— I mean, you. Don't you think so too?"

Her casually oblivious tone further grated Mia's fraying nerves.

Chapter 38: A Grain of Wheat, A Single Cookie

Luckily, the storm was gone the next day. It had blown over while Mia was busy engaging in her favorite pastime—counting trivial objects. With the usual vacuous expression on her face, she'd been mentally tallying the number of rocks in the cavern.

Keithwood, under Sion's orders, had gone out to survey the area as soon as the winds had died down. Before he left, Survival Connoisseur Mia had added an extra request.

"Keithwood, while you're out there, could you look around and see if there is a spring or small stream nearby?"

Securing drinking water was undoubtedly Survival 101. As an accomplished theoretical survivologist, Mia had spent a great deal of time coming up with all sorts of hypothetical scenarios, many of which involved her hiding in a forest by herself to escape the revolutionary army. The meticulous information gathering she'd done in preparation for these scenarios was now serving her well! Furthermore, it was this vast knowledge of survival that made her perk up when Keithwood returned to the cavern after his extended reconnaissance trip and reported on his findings.

"So, long story short, it never hurts to be careful, but for the time being, I haven't seen any signs of dangerous animals. The most I could find were some hare tracks..."

"Oh? Did you say...hare?"

Mia's eyes lit up. She'd had nothing to eat for almost an entire day, so what her ears heard as "hare," her brain comprehended as "food." Whatever left those tracks, its days— hours, rather, were numbered.

"Also, only one of the tents survived, but I have no idea how the inside fared. It's one of the ladies' tents, so I didn't go in. Finally, I located a water source in the forest not far from here. It's a small spring."

"I see. Fine work as usual, Keithwood. Fast and reliable."

Sion's compliment earned him a shrug.

"What can I say? I'm your attendant. It's a job requirement," Keithwood said in true workhorse fashion.

For the time being, they decided to make the cavern their base of operations and their first priority would be to salvage whatever they could find in the remaining tent. Hoping to find tools and, with some luck, rations, they headed back to the camp. Unfortunately, luck was not on their side. The remaining tent was in shambles, its frame toppled and its contents exposed. All the equipment inside, which were premium items the Greenmoons had specially prepared for the occasion, were destroyed, their mud-covered remnants robbed of both form and function. The rations fared worse; there wasn't even a trace left.

"Well, this *was* meant for us to sleep in and not much else..." muttered Mia.

They'd only taken a small amount of food with them onto the island. Most of it was stored on the Emerald Star.

"I suppose it was too much to hope to find something to eat here... Oh, wait a minute."

She dug through the remains of her personal belongings. Her travel trunk had been blown open and the extra dresses it had held were gone, but she fixed her eyes on a small wooden box that was still fastened to a corner inside. It seemed to have survived the storm. Gingerly, she removed it and opened the lid, revealing ten large cookies. That's right. Mia was the kind of person who took cookies with her when traveling. Guided by a firm belief in the necessity of sugar before bed, she'd added them to her luggage.

"Oh, thank the moons they're all right..."

Blinking away a tear of relief, she promptly reached for one...and stopped. A thought suddenly occurred to her.

I have a feeling I'd better share these with everyone equally.

Mia, you see, was well aware of the fact that denying people food could lead to *serious* grudges, and these grudges had a tendency to resolve themselves through guillotines. Even the preemptive eating of a cookie could cause people to resent her, thereby leading to a reunion with her old and decapitation-loving friend. The possibility was low, but it was certainly not zero. Had she hogged the entirety of a massive strawberry cake, including all the strawberries, then she could perhaps stomach the guillotine as a

consequence. Having her head chopped off for sneaking a bite of cookie though, was definitely a bad trade.

Therefore, she rallied every last bit of self-control she possessed and began battling her appetite for control of her hands. She huffed and puffed, chest rising and falling with each labored breath—yes, the battle was *that* epic, in her mind at least—as she tried to subdue the beast of hunger within. It fought her tooth and nail. With teeth clenched and lips peeled back in a snarl, she struggled against it like a fierce animal vying for dominance. Ultimately, she succeeded in containing her craving and managed to bring the wooden box of cookies to the rest of her group without devouring it on the spot.

"My oh my, Princess Mia. Now this is a pleasant surprise. How did you know to bring something like this with you?" said Keithwood, clearly impressed.

Mia immediately huffed out a smug breath.

"I didn't. I was simply prepared. Preparation, Keithwood, is the mark of prudence. And I am a prudent person."

"That's all well and good," interrupted Esmeralda, lips twisted in displeasure, "but why in the moons did you give some cookies to the commoners too? Please, Mia. Have some dignity."

Mia eyed her and sighed. Esmeralda's attitude toward commoners was the predominant one among nobles.

She's completely missing the point. Clearly, she fundamentally doesn't understand the significance of these cookies...

It was true, of course, that if Mia ate more cookies, it would fill her stomach further. However, there existed an equal and opposite interpretation—every cookie she ate for herself would only cause her stomach to grow fuller by one cookie; it would do nothing more. What if, then, she chose to share those cookies instead? Wouldn't everybody who received one feel indebted to her?

Indeed, these weren't just cookies. They were seeds. And she was sowing them. A grain of wheat, if not buried in the dirt, would never amount to anything more than a single grain of wheat's worth of food. By the same token, a single cookie, if eaten, would forever be just a cookie consumed. But if it were planted as a seed, there might come a day when it yielded a cookie tree.

Keithwood... Sion... They're friends now, but who knows? Circumstances can change. It's certainly not impossible for them to turn into enemies down the line.

Mia was reminded of an old tale she'd heard, and idly, she

began to self-insert. Picture, if you will, a large river flowing past red, rocky cliffs, upon which a hastily formed navy suffered a crushing defeat. Then, suppose that navy belonged to her, and she was now on the run. Finally, envision a scene where, with enemy troops hot on her heels, she came upon Keithwood, who stood in the way of her escape. In that desperate moment, she could face him and say, “Do you remember the cookie, Keithwood? The cookie…that I gave you that day?” If he then, out of a sense of obligation, chose to let her go, it’d all be worth it. As long as she got back home alive, she could rebuild and recover.

Anyway, enough imagining… The point is, if she could exchange a cookie now for a favor later, she considered that a good deal. Granted, that was more a rationalization than anything else. On a fundamental level, not sharing the cookies with the attendants was simply not a choice she’d ever make. Anne went without saying. Keithwood needed one too, since she’d anger Sion otherwise and an angry Sion was the stuff of nightmares. Also, keeping Keithwood happy meant that the cookie she gave away might eventually make its way back to her in the form of a delicious pot of hare stew. This wasn’t charity; it was an investment. A cookie today for the hare stew of tomorrow. As for Nina… Well, if she collapsed from starvation, Esmeralda would probably throw a fit, and frankly, Mia just didn’t want to deal with that possibility. Therefore, she decided to prioritize the group’s nutritional well-being for now.

The sugary treats worked wonders on their empty stomachs, instantly bringing smiles back to their faces. Furthermore, just in case anyone was curious, after the seven people in their group each got a cookie, she divided the remaining ones evenly among them as well.

Better to just give it all out upfront. Holding on to a few might lead to a mad scramble for them later, and that would be a disaster. After all, hunger changes people, and not for the better… Ugh, I’ve seen how scary they can get…

Having just fought down her own beast of hunger, she was well aware of how dangerous it could be. The way she saw it, they couldn’t fight over the cookies if the things were already in their stomachs. It was Mia’s version of risk management.

They spent some more time rummaging through the tent to

little avail. The only other thing they found was something Mia had stuffed at the bottom of her trunk, hoping nobody would notice it...

"Ah. Right. This thing." Mia eyed the swimsuit dourly. "The indecent one Esmeralda brought for me... Well, this is definitely useless."

She tossed it away, only for Anne to hastily run up and snatch it out of the air.

"Ah, milady, wait." She gave it a good look over before her eyes widened a little. "This... Milady, we can use this."

Chapter 39: Lured by the Scent of Mayhem

The Central Orthodox Church had a long history, rising to prominence far before the Tearmoon Empire and Ganudos Port Country were founded. Prior to its establishment as a formal religious order it was simply a group of people led by a prophet who could hear the words of God. They spread the teachings of the Holy Book far and wide, laying the groundwork for a common system of morals and values. They considered it one of their duties to compile the histories of nations and to leave a record of human progress for future generations. They did so because they'd been taught that their God was one who "favored mankind with His blessing, and found joy in beholding the creations of man's labor, for He saw them as offerings to Him." It was, therefore, an important responsibility of those who serve God to write down the histories, cultures, and systems of order crafted by man, for such records were divine tribute.

Ganudos was, of course, home to a church of the Central Orthodoxy. Located in a corner of the capital, it lacked adjoining facilities such as an orphanage, and stood as a simple structure, neither toweringly magnificent nor disappointingly undersized. In its basement archives sat Ludwig and Vanos, who'd arrived just as the afternoon sun was taking on the orange tint of evening. Their meetings with various senators earlier in the day had been less than rewarding.

"Not that I expected much, so it's not really surprising... All right then. What next?" muttered Ludwig.

He wasn't particularly discouraged, but their shamelessly consistent employment of the Greenmoons as a deflection had further fueled his suspicions. After greeting the local father at the church entrance, Ludwig had immediately begun digging through the archives in an attempt to unravel the history of Ganudos through its historical writings.

He leaned back and ran his hand through his hair, feeling the beginnings of a headache. His frustration was not due to a lack of relevant information. Quite the opposite, actually. He'd come by it so easily that it was dumbfounding. The information was all there sitting in plain sight, and it spelled out a history he'd had no idea about.

"The Duke of Yellowmoon had maintained friendly ties with Ganudos Port Country ever since its founding. He'd sometimes contributed his own money to further the country's interests. Then, at some point, the Duke of Greenmoon took over his role..." He stared at the pages before him, as if confirming he'd read it correctly, then closed the history book and gazed up at the ceiling. "How could these facts have been hidden from us? The Tearmoon government isn't aware of them, at least. Or is it just me who's been oblivious all this time? Know that you know not, huh... My master's words are proving themselves to be painfully prescient..."

Ludwig was no stranger to how secrets worked. The more one tried to hide them, the more they stood out, because while the contents of the secret might be made more difficult to obtain, the fact that it held important knowledge was made all the more obvious. The problem with these facts he'd just uncovered was that they weren't secrets at all. A simple inquiry was all it took. He probably could have just *asked around,* had he known what to ask about.

And therein was the problem. Why hadn't he known? Because no one had bothered to tell him. These facts had been concealed by their own insignificance, excluded from reports because they were deemed so trivial as to be unworthy of mention.

"That's the thing. These facts... They weren't hidden. They just seemed so inconsequential that even when someone found them out, they wouldn't understand the importance."

Ganudos was a small country, often considered little more than a way station on a journey across the Galilea Sea. The question of who represented the empire when negotiating with them was of little concern. Nobody would have given a second thought to a transfer of responsibilities from the Yellowmoons to the Greenmoons. Nobody, that is, until now.

Ludwig ruminated. Had it been a coincidence? Was the current arrangement the result of simple chance? That certainly seemed a possibility, at least on the surface...

“But no. I should assume there is conscious intent behind this.”

His basis…was Mia. She’d told him to investigate this matter. The princess he served, the Great Sage of the Empire, had felt that there was something here… Something important enough to send not only him but also the strongest military asset at her command, Dion Alaia, to this country. That was enough to keep Ludwig thinking. To dive deeper, looking for strands of logic, trusting that they would form a web of intrigue.

“If this situation has been deliberately created…then what might the goal be? What reasons are there to consolidate communication under the House of Greenmoon?”

The first explanation to come to mind was that the Duke of Greenmoon was a more preferable negotiation partner. In other words, he was easy to take advantage of and more likely to accept deals that favored Ganudos, so they’d rather keep him as their one and only point of contact. This certainly seemed like a possibility…

“But that would work against them if something were to happen to the Duke of Greenmoon. For example, if he was ever assassinated, dealings with the Port Country would grind to a halt. Trade would suffer. But then again…maybe that’s the plan?”

The Tearmoon Empire’s food self-sufficiency rate was low, requiring it to import large amounts from abroad. Ganudos was a significant source of these imports.

“Still, the damage that would do seems too limited in scope.”

Even if food imports from Ganudos stopped altogether, the empire wouldn’t collapse immediately. It had plenty of time to appoint a substitute. Frankly, it wasn’t impossible for the empire to cut off the Port Country entirely from its trade network and still sustain itself. So why…

Ludwig jerked up. Clarity struck him like a bolt of lightning. What was it that had constantly consumed Mia’s attention ever since their first meeting? All this time, she kept warning him about an impending crisis, asking him over and over to prepare for it.

“The famine… Of course… That’s it.”

Suddenly, it all made sense. Suppose that famine struck, dropping the empire’s already dismal food self-sufficiency rate to a critically low level. If the flow of food from the Port Country were to stop at that exact moment… Right now, under Mia’s guidance, they were bolstering stockpiles and establishing new supply routes through Forkroad & Co.…but had they been forced to weather such

a crisis without any preparation, the consequences would have been unthinkable.

"Going down that line of logic, the Duke of Greenmoon would be more useful to Ganudos alive than dead. If her Highness's premonition proves true and a famine occurs, it wouldn't be at all surprising for the Duke of Greenmoon to flee overseas. Ganudos could aid his escape from behind the scenes, then stonewall his substitute by demanding that all negotiations go through the Greenmoons. A substitute would be appointed either way, but assassinating the Duke would leave them no choice but to accept the new face. Meanwhile, an absconded Duke was still the Duke, giving them an excuse to drag out the proceedings. That alone would deal significant damage to the empire."

First, they'd make Tearmoon dependent on them. Then they'd cut them off. Vulnerability through dependence. Without relying directly on military power, Ganudos Port Country had positioned themselves to strike effectively at the heart of a far stronger opponent.

"What's with the face, Ludwig? You eat somethin' bad?"

Ludwig peered up at Vanos's concerned face.

"I'm fine," he said through gritted teeth. "We got what we wanted. Let's go."

They stepped out of the church into the darkness of nightfall. Ludwig shook his head wryly. He'd spent more time contemplating than he'd thought.

"It looks like I'm starting to take after my master..."

"Did you figure somethin' out though?"

Ludwig explained his reasoning to Vanos on their way back to the inn. The big man listened intently, nodding along until the end when he said, "All right, I get what you're saying...but ain't there a hole in this plan of theirs?"

"An astute observation. There is indeed, and I haven't quite figured out how to fill—"

"Whoa, hold that thought!"

Vanos grabbed Ludwig's shoulder with one hand and pulled. His other shot to his waist and drew his sword. A second after leaving its scabbard, the blade rang with a metallic clang. A trail of sparks flew through the air, faintly illuminating the figures of men whose dark clothes melted into the night. Five surrounded them,

each holding a curved blade.

"These men are..."

"Son of a— When'd they pop up?"

Vanos glared at each assailant in turn, his sword brandished before him.

"Ganudos assassins?"

"Beats me, but judging from their weapons, I'd peg 'em as pirates."

They traded silent looks. After a span of two breaths, the assassins attacked in a flanking formation. Vanos held them at bay, sword swinging deftly left and right, but clicked his tongue as he fought.

"Tough buggers! They know their stuff. Not regular pirates."

"What are our chances?"

"Not good! They'll wear us down eventually. We go big or go home. Even then, I can get at most three of them before I go down. Maybe four. Not a fan of trading lives like that. But sometimes, you gotta do what you gotta do!"

Vanos took a step forward. The muscles on his powerful physique bulged in defiance of their enemies. He growled, lips pulled back in a savage grin.

"I'll do the fightin', you do the runnin'. Godspeed, Ludwig. If you manage to get away, give Her Highness my regards."

"Sir Vanos!"

Ludwig reached out to stop the big man, only for the gesture to cue his charge. Vanos exploded into motion. The assassins raised their swords.

Just before he smashed into them, something parted the air with a sharp swish. It traced an arc through the assassins' uniquely curved blades. The gust in its wake was punctuated by a reverberating ring, followed by the clang of severed metal hitting the ground. In perfect unison, the darkly garbed men raised the stumps of their weapons and gasped in shock, the timing so perfect it bordered on slapstick.

"What the—"

Flustered, they tried to turn toward the gust's source...

"Aha ha, I wouldn't do that if I were you."

They froze.

"Whoever turns, dies."

The voice was flippant, but the *presence* behind it was anything

but. Through the raised hairs on their necks, they knew instinctively that death was near. One of them let out a short yelp when the flat of a heavy blade settled on his shoulder.

“Hey, I like this. Now I know why that Jem fellow did this to the princess. You can feel the shaking through the blade. Fun.”

The blade bounced playfully inches from the assassin’s neck.

“Got you out of a real pickle just now, didn’t I, Ludwig?” The empire’s finest, Dion Alaia, smirked.

Chapter 40: Detective Mia and the Crystal Clear Spring

The forest's dense foliage suddenly gave way to a clearing. Spring water cascaded gently off the top of a small rock face, rippling the surface of a pond at least twice the size of the biggest bath in Saint-Noel. Wreathed by vibrant blankets of tiny flowers in full bloom, the mesmerizing beauty of the spring made it look like a scene out of a fairy tale, as if a goddess were about to emerge from the water at any moment.

The figure of a young maiden, pure and lovely, could be seen at its edge. Clothed in adorable bathing attire, she dipped a dainty toe in to test the water. A surprised squeal ensued and she quickly withdrew her foot. Despite having felt the water's chilliness, she nevertheless steeled herself, scooped out some with her hand, and splashed it over her slender limbs. Shimmering globules of crystalline fluid rolled across smooth skin, adding to its luster.

...Now, framing the scene like that might cause some to mistakenly get the impression that a young beauty was about to make her first appearance in the story, so to make things as clear as the spring water she was splashing on herself, the girl was Mia, who was neither divine nor particularly enchanting, at least in terms of looks.

It should also be mentioned that the surprised squeal wasn't so much an adorable "Eeek!" as a cracked-voice "Ngaah!" Again, just so everyone is on the same page. As for why she was even here in the first place... That would be Anne's doing.

"How about changing into your swimsuit and going for a quick dip in the spring?"

Anne's suggestion had been met with further support from Esmeralda. Trudging through slush in the downpour had left them thoroughly muddied. Neither clothes nor skin had escaped unmired. Frankly, to Mia's dungeon-hardened sensibilities, going a day or two without washing was no problem, but...

"I'm so sorry, milady... I can't seem to get all the mud out of your hair. Oh, this is just the worst... Your beautiful hair..."

The sight of a deeply aggrieved Anne convinced her that a bath would be prudent. Fortunately, she still had the swimsuit Esmeralda brought for her, which would allow her to be at least partially clothed during the act. Mia didn't quite have the guts to go skinny-dipping, even if it was on a deserted island.

Or so I thought...but this is still a little embarrassing, to be honest.

She glanced at Esmeralda who, despite wearing the same swimsuit as Mia, was rinsing herself off in the spring with utter nonchalance. Whereas Mia's had narrowly avoided being blown away with the rest of their clothes by virtue of being stuffed at the bottom of her trunk, Esmeralda's was never at risk. Nina had been holding onto it the whole time, diligently safeguarding the swimsuit from danger.

Baffled by the fastidious protection that a mere piece of clothing had enjoyed, Mia had given Esmeralda an "Are you serious?" look, but it didn't seem to bother her in the least. Her only answer had come from Nina who explained matter-of-factly, "Milady Esmeralda had been greatly looking forward to cavorting with Your Highness in matching swimsuits. In order to ensure milady's hopes were not betrayed, I decided to be extra careful and kept it on my person at all times."

Like mistress, like maid, I guess. This Nina person seems quite eccentric too.

"Hmhm, how marvelous. You said this was your maid's idea, Miss Mia? Not bad for a commoner," said Esmeralda, her delighted

voice pulling Mia out of her brief retrospection.

Ugh, there she goes again with the high and mighty routine... I swear, if she doesn't fix that attitude of hers soon, she's going to— Oh?

Mia's attention suddenly fixated on a single point. Said point rested, of course, on Esmeralda's exposed midriff, or more specifically, her belly. Firmed and flattened by frequent swimming, it joined her chest to her hips in a beautifully straight line. There, in that bared abdomen, Mia saw the utopian curvature she'd always dreamed of having—the ideal figure!

"B-But... I..."

She stammered, too shocked to form words as her hands went to her own tummy. She stroked it. It had certainly lost its early-summer jiggle, reverting to the state it had been in before the spring break. Pinching it no longer produced a mound of flesh. No longer a mound...but still a knob! She took another look at Esmeralda's slender abdomen and was forced to admit an upsetting truth.

I'm... I'm losing to Esmeralda!

"Okay, milady, it's time to get you cleaned up," said Anne. "I'll wash your hair first, all right?"

"A-All right, go ahead..."

Overcome by a crushing sense of defeat, Mia produced a feeble reply...before the implication of Anne's question suddenly sank in.

"Wait... You said you're washing my hair *first*?"

Unlike Esmeralda and the other high-ranking nobles, Mia was an independent bather, perfectly capable of tending to her own hygiene. Having Anne wait on her hand and foot for something like this was, frankly, unthinkable. She knew it, and Anne knew it. Which meant that by "first," Anne hadn't been referring to the order of body parts—hair, face, body, and so on. After the hair, she was going to wash something else. Knowing Anne, that something wasn't herself; with her devotion came the unerring tendency to prioritize Mia's needs over her own.

Then what is it that she intends to wash after my hair?

She took a quick glance at her surroundings, only to freeze when a certain object—rather, a pile of objects—entered her view. A slow dread seeped into the pit of her stomach, and she shuddered, for laying in a dirty heap at the edge of the pond were her own muddy clothes. With the storm's passing, the sky had cleared, allowing ample sunlight to shine down. If Anne washed her clothes

now and hung them up, they wouldn't take too long to dry. These facts considered, it was quite obvious that after her hair, the next item on Anne's washing list was her pile of clothes.

Which was fine. Mia certainly had no intention of changing back into muddy attire when she'd just taken a bath. The problem...was what would happen while her clothes were drying. Would she simply sit here and wait? No, because Anne would probably say something like, "Leave the clothes to me, milady. I'll wash them and hang them up, so you can head back and meet up with the princes first." Esmeralda would doubtlessly concur with this statement and follow up with something like, "As you should. Laundry is the work of attendants. As wellborn people, we should consort with those of equally high birth. To the princes!"

They would unite in their unwelcome desire to send Mia back to the princes! Worse yet, even Mia herself agreed that they couldn't just wait until their clothes were dry enough to wear again. That would keep the boys waiting for far too long.

Chances are, I'm the one who knows the most about what kind of food we can forage from this island... I can't afford to waste time sitting around here, or the quality of our dinner tonight will suffer!

In addition, she'd have no choice but to reluctantly follow Esmeralda back to camp. In her swimsuit! With her tummy bared! She'd be walking back into a public shaming! Having been thoroughly terrified by the sequence of events she envisioned, she began a hasty attempt to avert this dreadful fate looming over the imminent future.

"O-Oh, I just thought of something! Anne, could you bring me my clothes?"

"Huh? What for?"

"Well, I figured since I'm in the water already, I might as well give them a good scrub while you're washing my hair."

"What? No! That's my job. I can't have you trouble yourself with something like that, milady."

"She's right, Miss Mia. Just leave the menial work to your maid," said Esmeralda, chiming in with that infuriatingly flat belly of hers.

Mia glowered at it. Honestly, it was *offensive*. That kind of flatness should be a crime. She snorted angrily.

"What are you talking about? Maids? Masters? This isn't the time for that. We all need to be doing whatever we can to help.

Anne," she said, turning toward her with a commanding look, "you focus on your work. If you're going to wash my hair, then wash it until it's perfectly clean. In the meantime, I'll do my part..."

She waded toward her pile of clothes.

While Anne's washing my hair, I'll wash my clothes. Then, I'll hang them up. That way, they'll dry by the time I'm done with my bath. I know they will! But I need to work fast! Wash fast! Hang fast! Dry fast! Then put them on and head back! she thought as she plunged a piece of clothing into the water and began scrubbing at it.

Chapter 41: Ba-Bump!

While the girls were off enjoying the spring, the boys went back to the beach. Gazing at the battered shoreline, Sion crossed his arms.

"Well. What should our next move be?"

"Good question." Abel pursed his lips. "For starters, I don't see any signs of a wreckage, so..."

Searching through the flotsam along the coast revealed nothing that looked like it came from the Emerald Star, nor were there any injured sailors or drowned bodies.

"We need to be sure though. Whether or not that yacht is still afloat will decide our course of action. If it's moored somewhere else on the island to shelter from the storm, we can just wait until it comes back. Even if it sustained some damage, as long as it can still sail, we can send it back to Ganudos to request help. That being said..."

"That storm was a doozy," said Keithwood, picking up as Sion trailed off. "Lady Esmeralda sounded pretty confident about her yacht's durability, but..."

"I don't know how much we can trust her judgment. I don't mean to be rude, but the way she talks, she sounds like every other noble bigwig. Confidence from someone who subscribes to that school of thought isn't very reassuring."

Sion nodded in agreement with Abel's assessment.

"Agreed. At the very least, we should take what she says with a grain of salt. For all our sakes."

"We should probably proceed under the assumption that the yacht went under."

If the Emerald Star was intact, then the plan would be straightforward: they could simply wait. A few days of survival might be necessary, but it wouldn't take long for help to arrive. They could camp here for a week or so without much trouble. If the Emerald Star had sunk, their outlook would change significantly.

"Finding a way off this island ourselves...is not very realistic,"

muttered Sion.

Abel grimaced as well.

"Yeah, we'd have to build a new boat, and I don't think any of us are up for that... But who knows? Maybe Mia will come up with some sort of brilliant idea like she always does."

Mia's shoulders, it seemed, were something of a burden magnet, attracting the hopes and expectations of others without her consent.

"Our most realistic method of rescue is probably to have either Princess Mia's vassals or someone from the House of Greenmoon realize that something's wrong and send out a search party. That Ludwig fellow in particular seems pretty sharp from what I've seen..."

"In that case, we'll need some way to mark the position of this island for them."

"Maybe we should send up some smoke signals or something?" Abel, true to form, offered a predictable but nevertheless sensible proposal.

"Sounds good. All right, we'll focus on two tasks for the time being. One, raise smoke signals to call for help. Two, secure a supply of food," concluded Sion before pausing with an amused chuckle. "Speaking of food, what Mia did back there sure took me by surprise."

Keithwood nodded somberly in agreement.

"Yes. Who'd have thought that under circumstances like these, she'd give out her own rations so freely? And to us attendants as well."

"Considering the policies she's been implementing in Tearmoon, it'd be foolish to think she doesn't understand the importance of food supplies. Which makes it all the more remarkable that she'd part with her own so willingly. I never doubted her integrity, but even so... She's a marvel."

As he spoke, Sion turned his thoughts inward.

If we're going to live on this island, we should decide on a leader. I was debating between me and Mia, or maybe Abel...but after seeing that scorching sun, I don't think I have the nerve to nominate myself anymore.

Mia and Anne were first to rendezvous at the beach. The former's clothes were dry, whereas the latter's were still a tad wet. Anne had smiled and said, "It's all right. They'll dry while I'm

wearing them," when Mia looked at her with concern, but now, as the full heat of the sun beat down on them, she wondered if she'd made a mistake as she enviously eyed the cool dampness of her maid's attire.

"Ah, Mia, you're ba— Hm? Where's Lady Esmeralda?"

"She said she'd wait for Nina to wash her clothes."

Sion gave her a puzzled look, which was shared by the other boys. Only after Anne offered a supplemental explanation of Esmeralda's insistence on proper divisions of labor did they roll their eyes in understanding.

"Well, figures, I guess..." sighed Sion. "We have some important matters to discuss, so let's wait until she's here."

An hour or so passed, during which they'd finished the preparations for a signal fire on the beach, before Esmeralda finally appeared with Nina in tow. Sion looked at each of them in turn, making sure the whole team was present, before speaking.

"Until we manage to get ourselves off this deserted island, I believe we should decide on a leader for the group."

"Hm, I think you're right. They do say too many captains make a ship sail for the moon, after all," Mia agreed before putting a finger to her chin in thought.

Hmm... If it's a leader we need, then I think it should be me.

She felt fully qualified for the role. It seemed very likely that among the members of their group, the one most versed in the art of survival...was her. She could tell which plants were edible, and she knew how to catch fish. Well, river fish, at least. An amateur, she was not. With all that she'd learned, she now had confidence that even the distinguishing of poisonous mushrooms from edible ones—a feat said to be difficult—was within her grasp. Which was true, so long as it was her *confidence* that was being talked about. In a complete departure from her usual laziness, she was ready to volunteer herself for the job. Her own safety was at stake. There was no room for indolence in the matter.

However, I suspect things might get messy if I nominate myself... she thought as she stole a glance at Esmeralda. Being the host of this seafaring voyage, it did seem natural for her to take charge. *How odd though. For some reason though, I can't help but feel that if Esmeralda becomes leader, none of us will make it out of this alive.*

Her internal danger sensor threw a fit at the thought. *Not Esmeralda*, it seemed to plead. *Pick someone else for leader! Anyone*

else! As long as it's not her! Mia decided to follow its desperate advice.

"Since being the leader can be a rather heavy burden, I think one of these fine gentlemen would be best suited for the task. Don't you agree, Esmeralda?" she said with deliberate indifference, picking her words carefully to avoid any hint of self-nomination, thereby also subtly nudging Esmeralda's train of thought away from wanting to take on the role herself.

"Yes, I suppose I would indeed prefer a gentleman to take the lead in this situation. I think you're right, Miss Mia," Esmeralda replied, apparently convinced by this logic.

Mia's manipulation proved successful. It was a shrewd move on her part, taking advantage of the fact that Esmeralda tended to hold conservative beliefs about such things.

"I...guess that's true," said Sion, clueing into Mia's strategy. He studied Esmeralda briefly before nodding. "Yes, of course. Either Abel or I will be leader then."

"Uh, sorry to interrupt, but I'll let you have that particular honor," said Abel.

"How come? You realize there's no need for modesty right now, yes?"

Abel looked down to hide a grimace. Then, he shook his head.

"It's...not that. I'm just...looking to optimize things. I mean, I already know what it's like to command an army. I figured I'd let you take charge here so you can build up some experience. Even the playing field, you know?" he said with a good-natured smirk. "As for me... I think I'll just focus on keeping Mia safe this time around."

Abel's smirk concealed his conflicted emotions. Deep down, he wanted very much to be the leader. Who took charge here was a matter of pride, and Sion knew it. That was why he'd framed it as a discussion, inviting input from Abel.

I can try to be the hero, and I know I want to...but if my ego ends up putting Mia in danger, I'd never forgive myself.

He knew himself. Too well, perhaps. Discipline and effort, these were qualities he could muster. He would neither slack off nor give up. But excellence? Brilliance? Those would never be his, they belonged to Sion. In the end, he took a step back and asked Sion to be the leader. That was the best way to protect Mia. He knew this.

It was the right choice. And yet...

Being right...doesn't make it any easier to swallow, does it?

So, he smirked. The casual spread of his lips allowed him to swallow his chagrin.

"As for me... I think I'll just focus on keeping Mia safe this time around."

The subtle pain in his words went straight over Mia's head.

"Oh my, Abel..."

Ba-dum!

Mia's heart gave off an audible flutter. All she heard, bless her lovestruck soul, was the promise of a whole lot of alone time with Abel.

Chapter 42: Because

Under Sion's leadership, the group quickly got started. With the preparations done, all that remained was to start the signal fire.

"I believe we can do this by rubbing branches against each other, right?"

"Yes, your knowledge is most impressive, Princess Mia. This time, however, I happen to have brought a flint with me, so allow me to do the honors," said Keithwood, accurately deducing from her question that her survival skills were half-baked and lay more in the realm of academic interest than practical application. He made a mental note to never leave her alone with anything important to their survival, for he knew well that there was nothing more dangerous than a little knowledge. The most disastrous failures came from those who thought themselves capable.

Looks like I'd better keep an eye on the princess... he thought before his fears were promptly confirmed.

"Oh, I have an idea! If we're going to look for food, why don't you let me handle the forest? I'm quite familiar with the things that grow there, you know? All the plants and mushrooms and—"

"That sounds like an *excellent* idea, but I'm afraid I'll have to accompany you on your woodland quest, Princess Mia. Since we don't know what the island is home to, for your safety, I'll need—humbly request that you follow my instructions when we're there. Will that be all right?"

He smiled a cordial smile—the kind where the lips and cheeks and eyes were all technically curving in the right directions, but there weren't quite enough muscles involved for it to be genuine. This subtle imperfection was completely lost on Mia.

"Oh, look at that plant! What was it called again? Something mugwort, I think? It's supposed to be bitter but edible."

"Ah, impressive. You're right on. That's called Southsea Mugwort. You can remove some of the bitterness by parboiling it. Very nutritious stuff though. Good find."

Ultimately, Mia and Keithwood had been assigned forest foraging duty. Sion and Abel would keep an eye on the signal fire while trying their hand at sea fishing. Finally, Anne and Nina—and, technically, Esmeralda—would stay in the cavern and make preparations to cook the food the others brought back.

"I give you my word as a Greenmoon that Ni— Ahem, my maid will produce a most delectable dinner worthy of our name. We might be a little lacking in tools, but I'm sure that won't be a problem. Right?" Esmeralda had said with a questioning glance at Nina, whose eyes shifted diagonally upward as she considered her options.

"Let me think... The menu will be limited, but if we have enough ingredients, I believe I can cook up something reasonable," she answered, stoically accepting the task Esmeralda threw at her.

Mia studied her for a second.

"Hm... Poor girl, having to put up with Esmeralda's nonsense all the time," she muttered to herself before shrugging. "Oh well. She's got plenty of practice at least. I guess she'll be fine."

Blissfully unaware of the inherent irony in her callous comment, she did not notice how Keithwood's eyes grew distant and weary as he stared at her. Nevertheless, he resisted the urge to comment, and the two departed on their foraging quest with—mostly—no hard feelings.

Now, however, Keithwood was beginning to reconsider. After entering the forest, Mia had discovered plant after edible plant, and they'd quickly amassed quite the collection of succulent greens. It was, if he was being perfectly honest, quite impressive. So impressive, in fact, that it was deluding him into wondering whether he'd been unduly harsh in his appraisal and that her ostensibly half-baked survival knowledge had actually spent far more time in the oven than he'd first thought. Fortunately, Mia immediately disavowed this incorrect assumption of her competence.

"Ah, look! I think this mushroom is one of the edible kinds. In fact, I'm sure of it. My gut is telling me so," she said as she reached for the fungus.

Keithwood scrambled to stop her.

"For the love of— Ahem. No, Princess Mia. We'll pass on mushrooms," he said in a polite but final tone.

"...Excuse me? I'm not sure I understand. Why are we passing

on mushrooms?" she asked with a frown.

"Because."

"Because?"

"Because it's fine. We're good. Now let's move on."

Mia pouted in protest but, daunted by his stern insistence, reluctantly stepped away from her fungous prize.

"What a terrible shame... It looks so tasty too..."

For the record, the thing she was about to pick was known as the three-day maitake. Its toxicologic properties could be deduced from its name—"maitake" for "dancing mushroom" and "three-day" for...well, three days. Basically, eating one of these would keep you dancing for three days straight due to all the hallucinogenic poison it contained. Definitely not edible. Keithwood just saved everyone's lives. Or at least their collective dignity.

"Speaking of tasty," said Mia, her attention promptly shifting to a new object of interest. "Do you see that fruit up there? It looks good, doesn't it? But I know, as a matter of fact, that it's actually poisonous."

"You're right. That's an ogre slayer up there. You really do know your stuff," Keithwood replied, opting to keep to himself the final part of his comment—"Except for when it comes to mushrooms."

Seriously, what is it about this girl and mushrooms? How can she be so obsessed with them while also being so poorly informed about the things?

He'd only begun to dwell on the walking enigma that was Mia before he abruptly seized her wrist. The motion was becoming sort of a reflex by now. A few inches from her outstretched hand was a white mushroom, its hue so bright and brazen that it all but screamed "lethally toxic." They both stared at it for a second before meeting each other's gaze.

"...Yes?" he asked with a level look.

"Oh, I just, um..." she said, her tone sheepish but her hand unretracted. "I've never seen this mushroom before, and it looked sort of interesting...and I was wondering if maybe it could add some flavor to our dinner? Like a secret ingredient or something?"

"It cannot."

"But, but, it might taste really good—"

"We cannot use it."

"Mushrooms really bring out the flavor in a soup, you know?

Especially in hare stew—”

“If you want hare stew, we’ll have to catch a hare first. And find something to stew it in. Therefore, I believe the proper progression should be to worry about flavors and secret ingredients after we procure those items first. Does that sound right to you, Princess Mia?”

He smiled. Well, his lips did, anyway. Nothing else on his face involved themselves in the effort.

“Ugh, fine,” she said, finally relenting before adding with a sigh and a what-am-I-going-to-do-with-you shake of her head. “But Keithwood, you really need to learn to be a little more flexible. You won’t make any friends if you’re always such a party pooper.”

A vein popped on his temple, but he maintained his smiling facade and kept reminding himself of her generosity with the cookies until it receded. A cookie’s worth of gratitude goes a long way!

“Let’s ignore the mushrooms for now and focus on gathering ingredients that require as little preparation as possible. Would that be all right with you, Princess Mia?”

“Yes, yes, go ahead. I swear, you’re lucky I’m so accommodating…”

Keithwood’s vein got a good workout that day.

Chapter 43: Ludwig the Delusion Catalyst

Dion's timely intervention allowed Ludwig to escape the assassination attempt by the skin of his teeth...and watch as his assailants received a good thrashing...and were rounded up...and strung in a line with rope...and brought all the way back to the inn with them.

"S-Sir, what is the meaning of this? Who are these people?" asked the bewildered inn owner upon their arrival.

"Well then, Ludwig, I'll leave the talking to you," said Dion before casually strolling off.

Ludwig shook his head in amused resignation before explaining their situation to the owner. Meanwhile, the assassins, their hands tied behind their backs, were led to a room in the inn where a contingent of the Princess Guard were already crowded together in the limited space. The Guard were an assorted bunch, some rough and vicious while others stoic and steadfast. To the captives' credit, none of them showed the slightest hint of intimidation when they entered the room despite the many fierce glares and growls that were their welcome.

"Right, then," Dion said cheerfully. "We've got plenty of questions, so how about you lot start talking, hm?"

He drew his sword, sending a chill through the room. The temperature seemed to drop a few degrees. Sweat appeared on some of the captives' brows as they recalled their recent experience with his expert handling of the weapon.

"Captain Dion, are you sure it's a good idea to keep all of them together in here?" asked one of the guards.

The tacit meaning, of course, was that interrogation generally worked better on victims when they were alone. Dion only shrugged at the suggestion.

"I'm not your Captain anymore, but anyway, it's fine. We'll keep them here like this. After all, being told your buddies are

suffering is one thing, but watching them scream and die is another. I think the latter leaves a stronger impression. Don't you?"

The captives rose in protest.

"Y-You think that kind of threat is gonna work on us?"

"Yeah, wasn't your princess supposed to be merciful and stuff? I heard she hates torture!"

They were answered not by Dion but Ludwig, who stepped into the room.

"Such threats are indeed inappropriate. Your objections are justified. Like you said, Her Highness is very merciful. Her benevolence knows no bounds," he said with a placid smile. "Let me tell you something that we've never made public. Back when Her Highness was in the Kingdom of Remno dealing with the uprising, there was a group of people who were working against her. They were spies from a foreign kingdom, and one of them went so far as to threaten Her Highness with a sword. This was, of course, a terrible crime, one worthy of the severest punishment."

The captives shared puzzled glances, confused by the sudden introduction of a seemingly irrelevant topic. Undeterred, Ludwig continued.

"All of them were eventually captured alive. So, here's my question for you. How do you think they're doing now?"

One of the captives snorted.

"What kind of question is that? They're dead, obviously. Either your sadistic buddy there lopped off their heads, or they were tortured to death in a dungeon somewhere."

Ludwig quietly shook his head.

"No. They're all alive. Alive and well, under the guardianship of Lady Rafina. Every day, they listen to her sermons, transcribe the Holy Book, and participate in charitable activities. They are...quite exemplary."

There was a long silence, during which the captives stared agape. Then, they burst into mocking laughter.

"Are you serious? Is that what they got for trying to run her through? Damn, what a joke! Your princess sure is a softie!"

The laughter faded, however, when the captives realized that their leader had suddenly gone silent. The humor had drained from his face, along with all color.

"Hey, the hell? Why so quiet? What's the deal?"

The leader ignored his mates' questions and looked directly at

Ludwig.

"These...people. Were they really spies? Not just regular soldiers?"

"They were expert spies. Seasoned men who received the strictest training. Professionals who could kill and be killed without batting an eye, so long as it served their missions. They had, of course, been thoroughly instructed in enduring torture as well."

The man made no response, but his behavior had begun to unsettle the others.

"H-Hey, what the hell is the problem? What's this guy talking about?"

"Tell me..." the man finally said, "how do you make a bunch of top-notch spies just...decide to go clean? These are trained killers we're talking about. They kill men like cattle. And now you're telling me they're listening to lectures everyday? Writing out holy verses? Doing *charity*?" He met their eyes. "They *cracked*. What in damnation did it take for that to happen?"

The resulting silence was deafening. Slowly, the implications began to dawn on the others. What had happened became obvious. These spies had stirred up serious mayhem and threatened the life of Tearmoon royalty. They'd committed an offense of the highest order. Of course they wouldn't be let off scot-free. In other words...they *did* receive some sort of punishment. And afterward, they'd turned into devout religious followers. Whatever happened to them, it had made them *seek God*. With a desperate passion. So what was this punishment that was so effective as to make saints of scoundrels?

"Y-You mean...they were so traumatized that listening to sermons and writing out the Holy Book everyday...is the only way they can cope?"

When do people yearn for the divine? When experiencing unbearable terror, of course. Just like how they'd all prayed for their lives when facing off against Dion earlier. Whatever awaited them, then, was presumably something that would *keep* them yearning, day after day...

Except Ludwig shook his head.

"No, that's not it. They're not doing so out of fear."

A longer silence ensued. The statement wasn't reassuring in the least. Fear, at least, made sense. The fear of physical pain, mental distress, the endless void of death... These were terrible things but

still within the realm of comprehension. Being imaginable made them bearable. But if it hadn't been fear that drove the spies' bewildering metamorphosis...then what had? The cause, in that case, was entirely unknown.

It seemed an impossible feat. How could these spies, who'd spent their lives doing the darkest of work, suddenly turn devoutly religious? They must be essentially different people. Whatever happened to them, it would have had to remake them, twisting their personalities and beliefs on a fundamental level. Whereas a known fear had limits, unknown fears did not. Unfettered by the constraints of reality, the would-be assassins fell into a brooding silence as their imaginations filled their minds with all sorts of cosmic and unearthly horrors.

Ludwig proceeded to smile at them, the expression almost gentle.

"That's why...you'll all be fine. You won't be tortured. You won't be put to death. There will be none of that. You'll simply become the same as them," he said as he rested a comforting hand on a captive's shoulder.

"Gyaaah!"

The man recoiled immediately and shrank away. Ludwig's words forced them to think, to wonder in spite of themselves, what transcendental horrors too mind-bending to be encapsulated by the language of man they were about to suffer.

"Come now. There's no need to be so scared. Her Highness is most benevolent."

At this point, nobody was taking Ludwig at his word anymore.

"She won't subject you to violence. There's no need for that. You'll open your hearts to her willingly."

Their minds filled with visions of clawing open their own chests in a mad frenzy, competing with each other to be the first to offer the princess their still-beating heart. Terrified gasps filled the room.

"Ah, where are my manners? You must be thirsty from the walk. I'll have some ale brought in."

They heard that with an implied "enjoy it while you still have the faculties to do so."

The staging was exceedingly effective as well, with Dion standing nearby inducing despair through his aura of menace. As the captives gazed upon him, imagining what kind of nightmarish entity they were about to confront in his master, Her Imperial

Highness, Princess Mia Luna Tearmoon...

"I-It was the King of Ganudos. H-He's the one who ordered us..."

They cracked.

Chapter 44: Go Go Mia Rangers!

The Mia Rangers, currently an expedition of two people, ventured deeper into the forest in search of food. They'd already gathered a good pile of wild grasses, but Mia had a different prize in mind.

A hare if possible...but failing that, at least some other kind of meat...

Her mind had already categorized hares as "meat." The island's entire leporid population was suddenly in imminent danger.

"Oh, that reminds me. I've read somewhere that frog meat tastes like chicken. Have you ever had any, Keithwood?"

"...No, unfortunately not."

Unaware of his strained expression, she continued her gastronomic musing. "I've heard that people who live in the south eat bugs...but I do find myself a little resistant to the idea. What about snakes though? If they're cooked well, I think I'm willing to try a few bites... The mushrooms, though... Can't forget the mushrooms..."

Being fully within earshot of her mumbling, Keithwood finally gave in to his curiosity eventually and spoke up. "Princess Mia, forgive me, but I must ask you a question."

"Oh? Ask away then."

"You seem very knowledgeable about eating in the wild. Is this because you are preparing for this famine that you believe will strike soon?"

"My... How do you know about that?"

"Ludwig mentioned it when we shared a carriage."

She considered her answer for a moment.

"I see. Good for him then. It was smart of him to tell you." She nodded firmly before declaring, "Yes, it's just like he said. Next year will see a poor harvest, and the harvests will remain poor for several more years to come. The resulting famine will spread across the entire continent. It's very important to prepare for it. Consider this my advice, and warning."

In truth, she couldn't care less what happened to the Kingdom of Sunkland. They seemed to have successfully navigated the famine in the previous timeline, and she figured they'd be fine this time around as well. However, it was just then that she remembered a grievance she'd previously held against Sion. During their undercover expedition into Remno, when the two of them had sat huddled around a campfire, she'd faulted him for passing judgment without due warning. Specifically, she'd been thinking of their past selves and how awfully uncommunicative he'd been before dubbing her an "enemy of the people." They'd been classmates, for crying out loud! He could have said *something*. Even just a quick "Hey, how about you tone it down a little" might have helped her keep her head on her shoulders.

And so...she warned Keithwood. In accordance with that universal do-unto-others principle of moral reciprocity, she— Ah, who are we kidding. Of course not. Her reason for doing so was more along the lines of...

In my case, being the kind and forgiving person I am, I don't hold it against him, but if the roles were reversed...there's no guarantee Sion wouldn't hold it against me! I can totally see him sucker punching me to get even!

...Self-preservation. Specifically, she feared retaliation from a disgruntled Sion.

Also, I guess I do sort of owe them one. Squaring the debt seems like a decent idea...

Only after this intricate sequence of calculations had she finally decided to offer a warning.

"I think it would be wise for Sunkland to take some early precautions."

Keithwood, however, tilted his head quizzically. "Not that I'm doubting the sincerity of your words, Princess Mia, but how do you know? Is it even possible to predict such things?"

His response did not surprise Mia. It was natural for people to question the validity of her warning. None of them had memories of the future, nor had they seen her old (?) diary. She couldn't simply walk up to them, give them a dire forecast of the future, and expect them to believe her. She tailored her reply accordingly.

"You are of course free to decide whether or not you believe me. The way I see it though, between believing in the coming of a famine, preparing for it, and then it never coming to pass...and

neglecting to take precautions, only to be blindsided... Well, one path is clearly more tragic than the other."

"I see. Always seek to prepare for the worst..." Keithwood said, a hint of quiet admiration in his voice.

Mia, to his surprise, shook her head and gave him a furtive grin.

"Not exactly. What I meant was...which mistake is easier to laugh off? Suppose that I declare a famine is coming and people listen to me. They stockpile a bunch of food, but then the famine never happens. Well, all that extra food can then be used for my birthday festival. We'll treat the people to free meals. I mean, it's *food*. You can always just eat it."

It would be wasteful, yes, and emblematic of an egotistical princess's excesses, but she'd receive little more reprimand than wry smiles from the masses, who would be sharing in her indulgence.

"The point is, I'd get off with a slap on the wrist."

And if a different future came to pass—one in which resilient wheat yields resulted in a massive surplus—then she had plans for that too. Plans that involved stuffing her face with lots and lots of cake. It would be, she firmly believed, a fine mistake to have made. At the end of the day, it all came down to a simple truth: having extra cake brought people more happiness than having none.

"So I see. A laudable stance to take, I think." Keithwood regarded Mia as they walked, feeling a renewed respect for her. Soon after, the forest gave way to a rocky area. They were a little west of the island's center.

"It's a little hard to walk here... Eeek!"

She stumbled as some rocks gave way underfoot. He swiftly swooped in and caught her.

"Careful now. It looks like we're walking on loose rock here. The ground isn't stable. We probably shouldn't go this way."

"Yes, we should warn the others too. It's in the opposite direction from the spring anyway. I doubt we'll need to come here..." She paused, glancing up at him as he stood protectively over her. Then she gently elbowed him with a grin. "My, Keithwood, you sure know your way around girls, don't you? How many hearts have you broken, hm?"

"Ha ha ha, I'll leave that to your imagination. All I can say is that these days, the only thing breaking is my back," he answered, smiling as he scratched his cheek.

Chapter 45: Lighthearted Survival

By the time Mia and Keithwood returned to the beach with their leafy loot and fruity plunder, the cooking was already underway. A makeshift kitchen had been set up, complete with a wooden stand erected above a crackling fire, atop which sat a fine metal pot. Inside, thick slices of fish simmered alongside shellfish and seaweed, making for a rather rich seafood stew.

"My! Stew!"

Mia gasped in delight at the sight. She'd given up on that dream, figuring even if they'd caught a hare, they wouldn't have a pot to cook it in. Now, the door to exquisite hare stew had reopened. Once again, the rabbit population of the island was faced with the possible fate of ending up in her stomach.

"Nice. How did you manage to find a pot?" asked Keithwood, visibly impressed.

Nina replied in her usual stoic, expressionless manner.

"Our main priority when it comes to food is to ensure it is safe for consumption. To that end, most things are fine once you heat them thoroughly enough. Stewing or pan-broiling is easiest, and I figured having access to a pot would be convenient for such purposes. I then remembered that we'd brought one with us and suspected that a pot meant for serving many would not be blown away so easily. Fortunately, after a little searching, I found it caught on a nearby branch."

Keithwood's eyes grew distant as he listened to her explanation.

"Yes... Priorities... Of course. What you say is most sensible. How comforting it is to know that the preparation of our meals is in the hands of a seasoned, *sensible* cook like yourself," he said with the emphatic relief of a wayward soul who'd found a fellow countryman in a foreign land.

Mia cocked a quizzical brow at him, but the matter failed to keep her interest and she soon gave an "eh, whatever" shrug.

"In any case, this is wonderful news. Now that we have a pot, we can stew hare, and we can even add mushrooms..."

The relief in Keithwood's eyes waned, however, as Mia began rattling off a list of delicacies she'd like to try. The pot was big, but her ambitions were bigger.

"I must say though, seaweed is one thing, but how in the moons did you manage to catch all this fish? I don't remember taking any fishing rods with us."

"We found some branches to use as rods," Abel answered. "As for the string, I'm sorry to report that we had to ask your attendant to sacrifice something precious of hers."

"Huh? Wait, Anne?"

Mia glanced at Anne, wondering what he was referring to. She looked her maid up and down, then noticed the tail of her long red hair peeking out from behind her.

"No... You don't mean..."

"Yeah... They do say a woman's hair is her crowning glory, after all. I know it means a lot, but..." He bit his lip, but the gesture earned him an amused chuckle from Anne.

"Oh please. Hair grows back, and it's not like it takes any effort from me. I'd have to cut it eventually anyway, might as well put it to good use! Besides, if my hair played a part in making sure milady can enjoy a nice, filling meal of fish, then that makes me happier than my hair alone ever has."

"Anne..." Mia's lips quivered a little at such a sincere display of devotion. In an effort to compose herself, she glanced at the spoils of her foraging trip.

"If we're having seafood stew, I'm afraid the stuff we brought back won't go very well with it," she said as she laid out a number of wild plants and fruits.

"Whoa. That's a lot. You picked all that?" Abel's eyes went wide. Sion and Nina were equally surprised.

"It's not that much. I'm sure any of you could have managed the same." Her humble response would have been, well, *humble*, if she hadn't said it with the very smuggest grin on her face. "And Keithwood helped."

"No, it was all you, Princess Mia. I must admit that the vast knowledge you displayed has thoroughly impressed me," he said with a deep bow before resuming his scrutiny of the distant horizon and muttering, "I only wish you could have...restrained your curiosity of mushrooms a little. That's all."

Mia, out of earshot, only frowned at him before her eyes drifted

toward other more tasty-looking things. She would not sweat the small things, for she had a big heart—one as big as the pot of stew that now occupied her full attention.

"Oh, by the way, we found some fullmoon palm fruit too. Its juice is wonderfully sweet, and we might be able to hold something with the hard shell," she mentioned.

"We only picked one," added Keithwood. "If we manage to crack it open and find that it's useful, we'll go back and get more."

Nina nodded firmly at the suggestion. "Thank you very much. I was just thinking we'll need some bowls for the stew."

She scanned the things Mia brought back with pursed lips.

"I'll clean up these plants and add them to the stew. As for the palm fruit juice, I think I can use it as seasoning. It might add some extra flavor," she said in a straightforward, no-nonsense manner.

Mia recognized that tone. It was the tone of an accomplished woman who knew what she was doing! Being something of an accomplished woman herself—in her own opinion, anyway—she grew wide-eyed at the implications.

"My, Nina, are you saying that you actually *can* cook perfectly well under these circumstances? I thought that was just Esmeralda being...herself."

"I doubt my modest know-how can satisfy the refined tastes of royalty such as yourselves. I will make every effort to do so, but I apologize in advance for my insufficiencies."

Nina lowered her head humbly, but Mia dismissed her apology, choosing instead to marvel at the pot of stew.

"You're selling yourself short. Honestly, you've done more than enough, especially given the circumstances. Just look at this stew. It smells wonderful."

"It certainly does," said Keithwood who, having missed the initial preparation, was observing it with interest. "What did you season it with? Just salt?"

Nina shook her head.

"In order to ensure milady Esmeralda can always enjoy delectable meals, I've made a habit of carrying magic powder on me."

"M-Magic powder?" asked a puzzled Mia.

Nina held up a small bottle that hung from her neck.

"This is a bottle of spices from overseas. One shake of this is enough to significantly improve the taste of almost any dish."

"My! Are you serious! This?!"

Mia stared at the bottle, fascinated by its contents.

The atmosphere of the group was lighthearted, and everyone shared in the mirth. Everyone except for a chagrined Esmeralda, who proved to be no slouch at the business of chipmunk-ing her cheeks.

The similarities to Mia do not need to be pointed out.

Chapter 46: Mia and Esmeralda's Sleepless Night

I won't stand for this! No I will not!

Esmeralda grunted in displeasure as she spooned more of Nina's special seafood stew into her mouth. The fullmoon palm fruit's juice imparted a tasty zest to the sea salt seasoning, further enriched by the sprinkle of Nina's magic spice powder. A pleasing aroma filled her nose as the hot soup flowed down her throat and warmed her body. Coupled with the greens that Mia had brought back, which were boiled to perfection as well, the stew proved tastier than most meals provided by your standard local inn.

That was all well and good. As a maid serving the Greenmoons, this level of culinary competence was simply expected. Esmeralda's grievance lay elsewhere, namely...

How come no one's complimenting me on the cooking?

The accomplishments of attendants belonged to their masters. Since Nina had produced tasty cuisine, as her mistress, Esmeralda deserved recognition. Yet to her frustration, everybody just kept commending Nina for the cooking. No one spared a word of praise for Esmeralda.

This is not right! It simply is not!

To her credit, Esmeralda had actually helped with the cooking, albeit reluctantly. It was bad enough that the two princes had involved themselves with the grunt work, but even Mia had gotten her hands dirty, leaving Esmeralda with no choice but to join in. And sweet moons, the girl had worked so *hard*. Had Mia possessed the good sense to slack off, then Esmeralda could have offered a pointed "Surely, such work is below ladies of noble blood such as us" here and a dissenting "Let's leave the physical labor to the boys" there. But with Mia, her superior in rank and junior in age, fully committed to helping out, she had no excuse to do otherwise. As a result, the vector of her irritation naturally pointed toward Mia.

She's always *like this! We're nobles, for the moons' sake! We're*

supposed to watch the lowly peasants work for us, and take pride in it! That's how the tradition goes!

Tradition and custom governed the behavior of high-ranking nobles, and thus did they govern hers. There was a properness to it. A dignity with which those of elevated blood were expected to carry themselves. To someone who'd had such beliefs ingrained in her from a young age, the way Mia behaved was nothing short of perplexing. From the way she remembered the names of all her attendants to the eagerness she displayed when doing menial, tiresome chores, it was all very confounding. In Esmeralda's eyes, Mia was like a walking enigma, one without a shred of common sense and a strong propensity to debase her person and princessly station.

And because of her nonsense, I'm stuck doing the same... Ugh, what a terrible bother.

Her anger continued to simmer throughout the evening, following her into her crude cot. The rest of the group, having exerted themselves figuring out how to live on an unfamiliar island, fell into a swift and weary slumber. She was left to brood on her own, any hint of sleepiness dispelled by her foul mood.

"...I can't sleep. Ugh, I can't sleep at all! Maybe I should take a walk..."

She sat up and blinked, waiting for her eyes to adjust to the darkness. Seeing that everyone was sound asleep, she nodded contentedly and got to her feet. After taking a few steps toward the cavern entrance, she suddenly stopped.

"...That reminds me, didn't they say something about not going any deeper into this cave?"

She recalled the warning from Sion and Keithwood with a mischievous grin.

"In that case, I think I know exactly where I'm going. That'll teach them to tell me what I can or cannot do. I am a free and noble soul, and nobody can bind me."

For the record, they also warned her not to go to the rocky area past the forest, but it was night out, and a free and noble soul like her didn't appreciate the thought of walking through a forest in the dark. Too spooky. She'd planned to just loiter near the cave entrance for a while, or maybe wander the proximate surroundings at most. If she could stay inside the cave though, it'd be a different story...

With her mind made up, she sneakily tip-toed her way deeper into the cavern. One hand on the rock wall, she walked until she was a good distance away from Mia and the others before letting out a soft but victorious laugh.

“I bet they all thought I wouldn’t dare go any further due to how dark it is here. Well…” She pulled out the pendant that hung around her neck. “Check and mate.”

Embedded in the pendant was a very valuable gem she’d acquired from overseas called arystal. Commonly known as a moonlamp rock, it absorbed sunlight and glowed in the dark.

“I must say though, this cave just keeps going and going, doesn’t it? I do wonder what it’s like deeper in,” she murmured curiously as she steadily proceeded into the lightless depths.

Esmeralda was the type of girl who, if warned against going somewhere, would suddenly be overcome by an urge to do exactly that. It probably ran in the family. The walls steadily narrowed and the ceiling grew low, but she paid these signs no heed, dropping into a half crouch to keep advancing. On and on she went only to discover…nothing at all. There was nothing interesting. Nothing strange.

“Hmph. I thought I’d find something in here…but it’s just rock and empty space.”

Growing bored, she considered turning back, but momentum pushed her to crest what felt like a small hill, whereupon…

“My, now it’s all downhill.”

Grabbing hold of a conveniently sized stalactite nearby, she held up her pendant for light and leaned forward, trying to peer into the descending darkness.

“My…”

She heard a sharp snap—more to the point, felt it through her palm.

“Huh? What? Oh—” And with a long, echoing “Myyyyyyyyy,” she tumbled down the incline.

That night, Mia thought she heard a woman's cry somewhere in the distance. It sent her imagination into overdrive, conjuring visions of ghosts and phantoms roaming the gloom. Needless to say, sleep wasn't going to come anytime soon.

"O-Oho ho, how silly of me. Evil cultist specters? That's obviously nonsense. I just heard the wind. It was the sound of wind, that's all. It couldn't possibly be anything else... Hnnngh, Anne, Anne..."

In the end, Mia fell asleep clinging tightly to Anne. She happened to sleep very well. Good for her!

After getting plenty of sleep, Mia woke up the next morning with a sleepy yawn.

"Mmm... Hm... Anne?"

She rubbed her drowsy eyes and blinked a few times. Finding that she couldn't seem to find her loyal maid, she rubbed her eyes again to clear them.

"...Huh?"

It wasn't her eyes. Anne wasn't there. In fact, nobody was.

"My..."

She scratched her head and got up. Narrowing her eyes, she peered around the dim cavern, only to confirm that she was indeed alone.

"How terribly odd... I'm pretty sure Anne was beside me last night— Ah?!"

All of a sudden, memories of last night came rushing back. She recalled the unearthly wail that had echoed in the distance. It had sounded like a human scream. A human scream...on an island that was supposed to be deserted. What in the moons could that have been?

"We're supposed to be the only ones on this island...aren't we?"

Had they been mistaken? Maybe they had company. And maybe...it wasn't quite as human—or as opaque—as she'd like. Evil cultist specters, for example...

"Eek!"

Spooked by the chill that had run up her spine, she gulped. It had felt far too much like the cool touch of a ghostly hand.

"A-Anne... Anne..."

Her voice strained, she whimpered for her maid as she nervously shuffled toward the cave entrance. She couldn't shout Anne's name, for that would give away her position, and then...*it* would know where she was. Or maybe...*they* would.

"Eeeek! A-Anne! Where are you? Anne..."

Her vision beginning to blur with tears, she poked her head out of the cave's opening, only to find a fuzzy figure dashing toward her. She almost screamed but caught herself when she realized it was just Anne.

"Milady!"

"A-Anne..."

"Bad news! We— Waaah!"

Anne let out a surprised yelp when Mia all but pounced on her. Nevertheless, she safely caught the lunging form and gently stroked its back.

"What's wrong, milady? Did you have a bad dream?"

After some tender reassurance, Mia finally retrieved enough of her wits to calm down.

"Wh-Where were you all this time, Anne? And where did everyone else go?"

"Oh, that's right. I have bad news. It's best if we wait for everyone to get back before I go over the details, but Miss Esmeralda has disappeared."

"Huh? Esmeralda disappeared? What do you mean? How?"

Eventually, Sion, Keithwood, and Abel all returned to the cave along with Nina, who explained with a slightly troubled expression, "When I woke up in the morning, milady Esmeralda was nowhere to be found."

Chapter 47: The Cursed Pact

“Well well well, we sure caught ourselves a big one. Definitely didn’t see this coming.”

After leaving the captive assassins with the Princess Guard, Ludwig, Dion, and Vanos moved to a different room to discuss their plans going forward.

“Damn straight. I sure didn’t expect the Ganudos royal family to be involved,” said Vanos, shaking his head with a sigh.

“In other words, we are currently deep in enemy territory.” Ludwig pursed his lips. “The question is…what happens next?”

“Nothing, I reckon? The empire’ll crush them if they show any open hostility. ’Course, I doubt they’ll admit to being complicit in the first place,” said Dion before pausing to glance at Ludwig. “Unless you mean what *we’re* going to do next, in which case…we’re all waiting for you to tell us.”

“Fair enough… The way I see it, just knowing where we all stand will make things easier for us,” he answered, arms crossed in thought. “If we let word out that we’ve discovered who hired these assassins, or at least have strong suspicions, it should function as a deterrent. Keep them from getting any more ideas, so to speak. The other possibility is to wait until Her Highness comes back, since she might wish to use it as leverage during negotiations. Still…” He frowned. “This whole business, it bothers me. Something tells me we should speak with the King of Ganudos sooner rather than later.”

In his mind swirled the discovery that linked the Duke of Yellowmoon with Ganudos and the implications that arose therein. He had to know if what he suspected was true, and the only way to find out was to speak with the King directly.

“Sounds good. So, do you want to kick down their door, or should I? I guess sneaking in is also possible though, if it’s just the two of us…”

“No, we’ll do this the proper way and ask for an audience. We have their assassins. They can’t afford to ignore us.”

A souring of relations between Tearmoon and Ganudos was beneficial to neither. Therefore, if it was possible, Ludwig would rather reach a solution through simple discussion, and he suspected the other party felt the same. Two days later, he was proven right when his request for an audience was granted, and he traveled to the royal castle with Dion in tow. Upon arriving, the two of them were directed to an audience chamber. Considering the fact that they were requesting a direct audience with the King, such prompt accommodation was doubtlessly an exception among exceptions.

"Ah, well met. I believe you are the famed Ludwig Hewitt, assistant and right hand to the Great Sage of the Empire, Princess Mia? And this must be the empire's finest knight, Sir Dion Alaia. I often hear tales of your great deeds."

The King of Ganudos was, appearance-wise, rather unkingly. His smile and tone had a strange servility to them, as if he were trying to curry favor. He carried himself with an air that more resembled an old, groveling official than the leader of a country.

"Please accept my deepest gratitude for agreeing to meet with us on such short notice, Your Majesty," began Ludwig.

"Too much, too much. You're far too modest. I wouldn't dare keep a loyal vassal of the *Great Sage of the Empire* waiting. Especially when there seems to have been some sort of serious misunderstanding. Neither the Tearmoon Empire nor my humble country would be well-served by meaningless conflict between our nations," said the King in a mild tone.

Ludwig studied the man. At first glance, the King of Ganudos looked like a trifling character, cowardly and meek, but Ludwig's spectacles-enhanced perception did not miss the spark of intelligence hidden in those elderly eyes. He knew right then and there that he was dealing with a shrewd and cunning king—someone definitely not to be underestimated. At the same time, he was also filled with a certainty that he could handle this man, for the truly wise—his old venerable master or the young woman to whom he pledged his unwavering loyalty, for example—would have played a more perfect fool. They, in their boundless wisdom, would have hidden every last shred of it to lure their opponents into a false sense of security. The King failed to do so, and thereby revealed himself to be a formidable but nevertheless vincible foe.

"Well, let's not waste time then. Shall we get down to business, gentlemen?"

At the King's urging, Ludwig drew in a short breath and cleared his mind.

"Certainly. Firstly, I must bring to Your Majesty's attention the fact that recently, there was an attempt on my life."

"Was there? And this attempt occurred within Ganudos's borders?"

"Within the royal capital itself, in fact, in an alleyway near the church."

"Goodness. I'm terribly sorry for this dreadful occurrence. That area is indeed a tad unruly. Being a port country, we're constantly beset by the misdoings of former pirates. They often become local ruffians, and there's never any shortage of them."

I see. So you intend to pin this on pirates, huh? Call it an unfortunate act of banditry by outlaws...

Ludwig brought one finger to the bridge of his eyeglasses in the timeless gesture of someone about to take things up a notch.

"I thought so as well! So imagine my surprise when we captured the assailants, questioned them, and were told that they were acting under secret orders from none other than Your Highness."

"What nonsense they spew! Surely, you did not go to all the trouble to come here because you *believed* those wretches," said the King with an exaggerated reaction of surprise.

Ludwig let him exercise his theatrics, silently studying him in the meantime.

"It seems obvious to me," the King continued, "that this was an act of wanton violence by outlaws, or perhaps a calculated attempt from a third party to drive a wedge between our nations... But well, it appears that you actually made the bewildering decision to take them at their word, didn't you."

"I did indeed, Your Majesty, and that is because I have in my possession enough evidence to convince me that they speak the truth."

That, of course, was a bluff. He nonetheless played it, hoping to draw some sort of telling reaction from the King.

"Ha ha ha, do you now? So be it then. We tried to train some former pirates for the task, but it seems that we didn't train them well enough. As you're well aware, we're a small nation, and our armies are poorly supplied. I suffer from a shortage of capable pawns."

"...So you admit your involvement in this matter?" Ludwig confirmed with mild surprise.

"I'd prefer to disavow the claim, but I see no way of convincing you of my innocence. In that case, let us proceed under the assumption that this claim of yours is factual. We may yet extract some amusement from this little talk. After all, you know as well as I do that we're simply going through the motions. Nothing will come of this, no matter what you or I say."

I see. So he intends to turn this into a he-said-she-said situation. That must be why he hired pirates for the job.

A confession from the King during a private talk such as this would mean little if he then went on to deny all association through public channels. It would be Ludwig and Dion's word against his, and that was a losing battle, especially if brought before the Duke of Greenmoon. Considering the close ties between Ganudos and Greenmoon, the Duke would doubtlessly trust the King over a commoner like Ludwig. They'd close the case with a simple declaration that criminals, and underlings, were too unreliable a source for testimony. Had Mia been present, the King would never have confessed so casually.

Ludwig's mind ran through this web of logic in an instant. Then he nodded.

So be it indeed.

These, he decided, were minor issues. He was more interested in what came after.

"Then, with the understanding that we speak in confidence, I shall ask a frank question. Why was I targeted? Was it to stop us from learning of the relation between Ganudos and the House of Yellowmoon?"

"Your question confuses me. It is true that we had ties with the House of Yellowmoon in times past, but I fail to see the relevance of this fact..."

"The Greenmoons make for a convenient tether, easy to hold and easy to discard. Does that clarify my question?"

Ludwig's theory went as follows. Ganudos's objective was to make Tearmoon dependent on them. Then, when the time was right, they would cut ties and starve the empire to death. Currently, Tearmoon's food self-sufficiency rate was extremely low. That is, a very large percentage of the food it consumed had to be imported from abroad.

It went without saying that no noble would repurpose their farmland for non-agricultural uses if they hadn't yet figured out how to acquire enough food for themselves, no matter how badly infected they were with the nonsense rhetoric of anti-agriculturalism. That was where Ganudos entered the picture.

Their exports titillated Tearmoon palates with a steady supply of seafood that, though once thought to be exotic, were now an irreplaceable part of the empire's diet. That was why if food ever became scarce—due to famine, for example—and imports from Ganudos ceased, the empire would sustain unthinkable damage. And if the creation of such circumstances was Ganudos's very goal...

"What you wish to avoid, assuming my theory is correct, is an early military intervention from the empire. If Tearmoon sends its armies here before it's sufficiently exhausted, Ganudos will be unable to defend itself. Therefore, you need to put up the consistent front of being a staunch ally. Even if you began restricting exports, you'd need to blame it on a breakdown of negotiations. That's why you couldn't have your true allies, the Yellowmoons, be the ones you're seen to deal with."

They'd secretly influence the Duke of Greenmoon to flee overseas while publicly demanding to speak with the Greenmoons, and no one else, regarding all matters of trade. In the unlikely case that the empire chose to mobilize its army, they'd waste time telling the Duke of Yellowmoon to pressure the government from the inside and run interference. Having one of the Four Dukes on their side afforded them a significant advantage when trying to influence Tearmoon politics. Of course, they had no guarantee the Duke of Greenmoon would act according to their plan, but even if he strayed, they could always assassinate him and hide his corpse, rendering him missing. The chaos it would generate within the House of Greenmoon while they dealt with issues of succession would buy Ganudos valuable time. This was the full extent of Ludwig's theory.

"Do you truly believe you can make an enemy of the empire and win?"

"An enemy? Whatever do you speak of?" The King smiled calmly. "Ganudos would never think to oppose the Tearmoon Empire. Such an idea would be ludicrous, no? We have a small military organization tasked with maintaining order and deterring pirates, but they wouldn't stand a chance against the mighty

imperial army. Why in the heavens would we, with our meager army, ever make ourselves an enemy of your great empire?"

Ludwig tensed at the King's response. He hadn't expected the old man to weaponize even the weakness of his country's military, employing it as a veil to shroud his own nefarious intentions.

"Let us assume for the purpose of argument," the King continued, "that I have plans to stop exports to the empire if a famine occurs. Even if this were true…do you really think you can use it as a reason to march your armies here?"

There was no military component to Ganudos's intended response. Had Ludwig caught even the slightest whiff of a plan to attack Tearmoon through military means, it would be ample reason to declare war. An act of open hostility against the empire would be responded to in kind. The problem was that "if a famine strikes in the future, then Ganudos will stop selling food to us" couldn't be construed as an attack. It was too roundabout, too hypothetical to induce a sense of imminent danger, especially considering the whole scheme hinged on the occurrence of a famine and would simply fizzle out if it never came to pass.

All in all, this Ganudos conspiracy was so utterly lacking in both initiative and aggressiveness that it could barely be called a conspiracy at all. The ambiguity cloaking it made it difficult to denounce. Ludwig was confident in his own logic, but his accusation was ultimately just inference. If challenged by his peers, he'd be hard pressed to defend himself against claims that he was chasing shadows. He bore no illusions about the feasibility of using this supposed conspiracy to argue for military intervention against the port country. Ganudos was no barbarian horde. It was a country of people who believed in the same God and observed the same religion as Tearmoon. Declaring war without just cause would simply expose Tearmoon to the censure of its neighbors.

The thing is, if the empire establishes a reliable system to ensure food self-sufficiency, Ganudos's maneuvering would be completely *ineffective. And that's what bothers me.*

Anti-agriculturalism… Had it not been for this ideologic plague, Ganudos would never have had a chance to even attempt such a ploy. The highly requisite nature of the accursed belief for this entire gambit stood out to Ludwig as uncanny.

For such a slow, pernicious ploy, requiring a persistent effort over years if not decades…it's too reliant on factors out of their control. Too

much hinges on the weather and the opposing nation's own failures. A famine, you can maybe argue has historically occurred once every few decades, but poor policy and governance can be reversed in a day.

Even the very belief of anti-agriculturalism was starting to smell of malicious design, possibly spread by the Yellowmoons in collusion with Ganudos. Still, something didn't add up. One of the Four Dukes though he was, did Yellowmoon really have enough influence to do something of that scale? Tearmoon nobility was hardly a unified front, and voices belonging to the other three factions were healthily and loudly represented.

At that, Ludwig paused his increasingly recursive contemplation and shook his head.

"Either way... Under Her Highness's guidance, we will reform the empire. Once systems to ensure food self-sufficiency are put in place, this ploy of yours will fall apart at the seams."

His declaration failed to produce a reaction from the King, who replied in his ever-placid tone, "I see. That's wonderful news. We are always delighted to hear of issues in friendly nations being resolved. Though I do confess some disappointment in the resultant decline this will bring about with regard to our food exports to Tearmoon, I will certainly make my peace with this eventuality. After all, the domestic affairs of your great empire are hardly something a small country like us can comment on."

Ludwig tightened his jaw, seized by a sense of apprehension at the King's response. He wasn't sure why, and that made him all the more uncomfortable.

The King of Ganudos watched until the doors closed behind the departing figures of Ludwig's party. Then, he leaned back with a calm smile.

"So, the lines have been drawn...and the oldest of the Great Houses, that of Yellowmoon, stands opposite the Emperor's beloved daughter. Hah. What a time to be alive. Let's see how this plays out..."

There was a cursed pact binding the empire, and the scope of its invisible fetters was about to be laid bare.

The Light of the Great Sage of the Empire —Princess Mia Burns Bright!—

Where there is light, there must be shadow.

Even in the beautiful capital of the mighty Tearmoon Empire, where the moon goddess herself was said to reside... Even in Lunatear, there were places cast into darkness.

Overlooked by the towering city walls, the Newmoon District was a slum ruled by death, disease, and destitution. Filth and rotting mounds of trash, long inhabited by worms and vermin, littered the streets. The sick lay helpless on every block, forsaken to their infirmities. Children, too young for despair but too wretched for hope, stared with empty, haunted eyes. There were no smiles, no dreams in their dreary world. Only hunger and the odor of constant decay. The people here did not live. Abandoned and with bare survival their only purpose, they were simply waiting for death to catch them. The Newmoon District was a hellish place, where the merciful moon did not shine, and its light only darkened the blanket of shadow.

Well, it *had been* such a place, at least. Now, the district has visibly changed. Streets had been cleared of refuse. The weak found willing hands extended their way, and the ill were no longer left for dead. Compassion was finally being offered as the rightful norm it was. This progress was evident on stone and skin alike, with scattered rubble and sunken eyes replaced by burgeoning buildings and smiling faces. Life was returning to the district, and its people, freed from the shackles of utter despair, had begun taking small but definite steps toward a bright, hopeful future.

"It's all thanks to Princess Mia. Her Highness came to this place of darkness and lit it up with her wisdom and kindness," said Ogen with a hearty laugh.

The soldier was well-built and wore light plate of polished silver. He proudly pulled back his shoulders, displaying the moon-

shaped marking engraved on the chestpiece. It was the crest of the princess, and only the Princess Guard were permitted the honor of wearing it. Its members were all men of unwavering loyalty, but even among them, Ogen was special. He was the earliest witness, the one who'd served as Mia's guard during her first visit to the Newmoon District. In a sense, he was the original. He'd been Princess Guarding before Princess Guarding was cool. And he was damn proud of it. Currently though, he was acting as guard not to the princess herself but to her guests, and he'd been tasked with showing them around the capital.

I wonder who they are... Her Highness's schoolmates, maybe?

The thought further stoked his burning curiosity, and he studied his charges with even greater zeal. One of the guests was a boy with silver hair. His clean-cut features and gentle air were contrasted by the sharpness of his gaze. There was something distinctly...royal about his manner.

A prince from somewhere, I reckon. Same with the other one, I think?

The next subject of his scrutiny was a black-haired boy, not as overtly handsome as the first but charming in his own right. This one seemed gentler in disposition, likely imbued with the kind of delicate charisma that would go on to melt oceans of hearts with a single, sweet smile...if not for the subtle martial strength in his stride and stance. No, the second boy might exude a tender air, but there was iron in his core.

Whoever he is, he's no average Joe. Seems like some sort of nobility. I guess that makes the third one an attendant.

His final charge looked a little older than the other two. This young man was no slacker in the looks department either, and it seemed obvious to Ogen that Mia was becoming a popular figure among her male peers at Saint-Noel.

Her Highness is a very pretty girl, after all... There must be tons of boys buzzing around her. They'd better not make any moves on her, the spoiled little buggers, he thought with classic paternal overprotectiveness.

Though he doubted Mia, the princess he was so proud to serve, would fail to select a worthy life partner, he still couldn't stop himself from worrying. To him, she was not only an object of respect and deference but also something of a beloved little sister, whom he wanted nothing but the best for. In that sense, his

thorough scrutiny of the three boys under his care left him...quite satisfied. He actually thought quite highly of the young trio, especially after the request they'd made for their tour of the imperial capital.

"We'd like to take a look at Princess Mia's accomplishments, if possible."

Seeing that they showed a keen interest in what she had managed to achieve, he resolved to afford them the utmost accommodation, even agreeing to take them to the Newmoon District, which would have been unthinkable under normal circumstances.

"Wow... So this is the district...that she helped..." commented the silver-haired boy, his voice low and pensive but filled with admiration, as he studied the area with fascination.

"Yes. I was lucky enough to have been there, guarding Her Highness on her first visit to the Newmoon District. It's a day I'll never forget."

"You were?" asked the black-haired boy with genuine interest. "Could you tell us about that?"

Ogen nodded.

"I sure can, and wouldn't you know it," he said as he glanced down the street, his expression softening with nostalgia, "we're in the perfect place for this story. It was right over there, you see? That's where it all began. A child was lying on the ground...and Her Highness ran over without any hesitation and took him into her arms. She fed him. Gave him the snack she'd been carrying for herself. I swear, she dashed off so fast I didn't have the time to react. Not my proudest moment as a guard, mind you, but that's how she is..."

He finished with a grimace, but there was more mirth than dismay in his voice. It was a very fond memory, and he savored every time he got to retell the story.

"Her Highness wishes to go to the Newmoon District."

He remembered clicking his tongue in annoyance when he'd heard that for the first time. The sudden directive had seemed like nothing but trouble. Figuring it was another one of the infamously selfish princess's whims, he'd cursed his terrible luck. Who could have guessed how it would all turn out?

Sometimes, the last thing you'd expect is exactly what happens... Life truly can be wondrous...

“Then, she took the child with her to the nearby church that runs an orphanage. Before she built the hospital, that was the only place that could treat the sick. I know the father there is on very good terms with Her Highness.”

“So that’s what happened...” whispered the black-haired boy with a thoughtful nod before asking, “If it’s not too much trouble, could you show us there?”

“Sure, but... Well, are *you* sure? We won’t have much time to see any other sights in the capital.”

When it came to touring Lunatear, the Whitemoon Palace was the first thing that came to mind. Standing at the center of a circle of villas belonging to powerful noble families, it and its stately neighbors comprised the Fullmoon District. Another common destination was the Grand Market, which always teemed with merchants. Those were most popular among foreign tourists, and this pair of locations alone was enough to keep visitors occupied for days on end. That was why Ogen wished to make doubly sure of the boy’s intention.

“That won’t be a problem,” the silver-haired boy answered in the other’s place. “We’re here because we want to learn more about what Princess Mia has done.”

“I see. Good, good... In that case, the hospital is on the way to the church, so I’ll bring you there first.”

He exhaled to clear his mind and refocus. This trio of guests were likely Mia’s schoolmates, and judging by their behavior so far they held a favorable opinion of her. In fact, he had a gut feeling one of them might even share a more intimate relationship with the princess.

All right, this is my time to shine. I need to give them a detailed account of everything Her Highness has accomplished. It has to be thorough, but it can’t come across as boastful. A fine line to walk.

Feeling a rising sense of excitement—he was no stranger to the thrill of a challenge—he gave the boys a conspiratorial grin.

“By the way, about that hospital... Did you know that Her Highness blindsided everyone with the method she used to raise funds for its construction? Let me tell you, what she did was downright brilliant...”

And so, he began gleefully recounting the tales of Mia’s exploits in the tone of an older and very proud brother.

They ended up spending the rest of the day walking around the Newmoon District. With dusk fast approaching, the trio decided to stay the night at the church. Ogen had insisted on showing them to an inn, but after much convincing, he reluctantly agreed to leave them in the father's care. After parting ways with the uneasy guard, Sion, Abel, and Keithwood shared a wry laugh.

"Wow... Mia's popularity is really something else," said Sion, still ruminating on the pure enthusiasm Ogen had radiated when speaking of her.

"To be admired by one's subjects is, after all, a sign of a great ruler. And a great ruler she'll be, judging by the look of things. Not that I'm surprised," quipped Keithwood with a smug told-you-so grin, the gesture a complete reversal of the silent, stoic persona he'd adopted in front of Ogen.

Normally, the only time he dropped his deferential, always-half-a-step-behind-his-lord act was when he was alone with Sion, but all the sword practice Sion and Abel had been doing together had begun to draw out his true self in the latter's presence as well. It was, perhaps, another example of Mia's propensity for forming bonds—both with and between others.

"Yes... I guess we shouldn't be surprised. Still, who would have imagined she could build a whole hospital from a single hairpin?" said Abel, making no effort to conceal his amazement.

"Tell me about it," said Sion, clearly sharing the sentiment. "I mean, yes, I heard that she'd built a hospital...but I had no idea she did it by single-handedly prodding the nobility into action. And with a damn *hairpin* at that."

The sheer genius of it all was, frankly, quite overwhelming, and though he was duly impressed, he also couldn't help but feel a sense of defeat. If it had been him in her position, what would he have done? The thought stuck to his mind with unpleasant tenacity. He could certainly have thrown money at the problem. God knows he had no shortage of personal funds. He could even have ordered other nobility to do the same. Making it so they'd do so willingly though, practically competing with each other to part with more of their own coin...was a feat on another level. It would literally have been beyond his imagination.

Keithwood would probably just tell me to learn from Mia's example...

It was true that for those who bore the mantle of governance, it

was necessary to learn and absorb all sorts of approaches and methods to better themselves. That was fine. He had no qualms about his duty. Mia's accomplishment was something for him to study. He could stand to improve by it. What he couldn't rationalize away, however, was the frustration of being left in the dust.

"Ha ha, it's so weird..."

Abel's chuckling comment pulled him out of his thoughts.

"Hm? What's so weird?"

"Her. You. Me. All of us, honestly."

Sion eyed him dubiously.

"What's this about?"

"Oh, I was just thinking," Abel replied, shaking his head with wry amusement, "here we are oohing and aahing about her building hospitals and influencing nobles, but normally, just hearing that a member of royalty gave away a personal item to a poor commoner would be enough to make your eyes pop out in surprise. If it had been any other princess, we'd be impressed by that alone, but because it's Mia, we just sort of shrug."

"Huh. Now that you mention it... Well, I never realized, but I guess we've all been raising our expectations of her. It seems like we've become a tough crowd to please," Sion said with a laugh.

Soon, however, he would come to realize that even their immensely elevated standards were but child's play—mere hillocks before the towering peaks that were the heights of the Great Sage's brilliance.

"Oh dear, you've all come a long way, haven't you? This way please. Follow me."

Upon entering the church, they were greeted by a man who looked every bit the gentle-natured priest of stereotypical description. So genial was his disposition that they were minded to trust in his inherent goodness in spite of the common idiom about books and covers.

"I do hope you'll forgive me for any inadequacies in your accommodations. It's difficult for us to offer the usual comforts here," said the father as he led them down a hallway.

"Hardly. We're the ones imposing. We'll take what we can get," replied Sion, his eyes quickly scanning the aged building and lingering on a few spots where the wood seemed newer.

"Oh, I should also apologize for the poor state of the interiors.

There always seems to be some more pressing issue, and we never get around to really fixing up the place," added the father, perhaps having noticed the direction of Sion's gaze. "With that said though, thanks to Her Highness's instructions, renovations have actually been proceeding quite smoothly. A lot of holes have been patched up. The drafts, they used to be awful. Much better now."

Just then, a young girl rounded the corner down the hall, walking toward them with a book in her hand. Sion presumed her to be one of the children from the adjoining orphanage, though the way she carried herself was almost...scholarly.

"Ah, Selia, good timing," said the father. "Could you go make some tea for our guests here? They're friends of Her Highness, classmates, and they'll be staying a night with us." Then, he winked at the trio of boys. "This, I think you can safely look forward to. The tea and sweets here come with the Princess Mia Seal of Approval."

"They do?"

Abel responded with surprise, which seemed to please the father.

"They certainly do. She selected them personally, after all," he said with a chuckle before continuing in an explanatory tone. "According to her, it's because she plans to drop by with some frequency, so she figured she might as well stock up for her future visits by sending us regular shipments of tea and snacks. Furthermore, she said it'd be a waste if any of them were to go bad, so the people here are free to enjoy them as well."

"Did she now?" murmured Sion, who immediately parsed what he thought to be Mia's true intention.

It seemed clear to him that it was all just a flimsy excuse to get some tasty treats into the hands of these children. To give these young orphans, who'd known little of life outside the slums, something to look forward to. A small but definite bliss to get them through their days.

"Sounds like her," said Abel.

"Yes, it's definitely a very Mia thing to do," agreed Sion.

The father showed them to a large room and bid them to make themselves at home before heading off. They obliged, putting down their belongings and resting their legs. After a little while there was a knock on the door.

"Excuse me..."

The girl from before, Selia, entered bringing tea and sweets.

Let us rewind the clock once or twice.

"Huh? Th-They're...princes?"

Selia's eyes went wide upon learning of the guests' identities. She almost spilled the tea she was making.

"Indeed. They're students of Saint-Noel Academy, which Princess Mia attends, along with many others of noble blood. Oh, but don't worry. I can tell that they're kind. I'd expect nothing less from friends of hers, maybe she even rubbed off on them a little," explained the father in a relaxed tone.

"Why? People like them, I mean— Why come here of all places?"

"Apparently, they want to take a look at what Princess Mia has accomplished. They'll become kings and dukes in the future, and they'll have to rule their own lands. I guess they want to learn from her example." The father looked off into the distance, his brows furrowed but his lips smiling. "It's a good thing, I think... Yes, a good thing. If there can be more nobles like Princess Mia, perhaps the empire will start heading in a better direction."

Running an orphanage in an impoverished district was hard. Very very hard. The kind of thing that added years to a person's body and weighed down their soul. It was a burden he carried from dawn to dusk, under sun and stars. And it was made heavier by every reminder of the nobility's apathy...

"That's why... I'm glad that they're here. That they're willing to emulate what she has done. After all, it might lead to more children like you. More...getting the opportunity that you have."

The father smiled gently at her.

"More children like me..."

Selia felt a tug on her heart. It might have skipped a beat. She remembered the look that Mia had fixed her with that day, the utter conviction of that gaze.

More...getting what I have...

Those unspoken words lodged themselves in her heart like seeds, sprouting quickly into an intense urge to do something. To act on a thought she'd been having since meeting the princess. With a sense of purpose, she made her way to the princes' room.

"Excuse me... I've brought some tea."

The nerves were there. She could feel them in the tenseness of her back and the slight jitter in her hands. There was nothing wrong

with that. She was speaking to princes. Nervous was the correct response, but it wasn't all nervousness. There was far more pride. She'd been rescued—no, *chosen* to be rescued—by the Great Sage of the Empire herself.

"Thank you. Are these the hand-chosen sweets we've been hearing so much about?" asked the black-haired boy.

He had a soft, endearing smile, and judging by what the father had told her, she figured this had to be Prince Abel of the Kingdom of Remno.

"Yes. Her Highness Princess Mia gifted these to us. She is a very kind person."

"I see..."

Abel nodded as he studied the tray. The silver-haired boy—Prince Sion, surely—and his attendant watched the first prince with good-natured grins. There was a prevailing gentleness to the boys, almost as if she could say anything to them without fear of unfair and violent reprisal. She steeled herself and drew in a deep breath to speak.

"Um, I know you must be very tired, but could I have a moment of your time?"

Summoning no small amount of courage, she lifted her gaze to meet their eyes.

"Hm? What is it?"

"I heard that you came here to learn about what Her Highness has done. So, I, um... I wanted to tell you my story. So you'd know what she did for me..."

Ever since the day everything changed, Selia had been plagued by a dark emotion. It had weighed on her mind like an anvil, and only after much thought did she realize what it was—guilt. She had been chosen by Mia to be rescued. That was undeniably true. But chosen or not, it was also undeniable that she had been *rescued*. Mia had opened a door for her, and the radiant path beyond it seemed to lead straight to her dream. The promise of education. A better future. She could learn whatever she wanted. Study to her heart's content. Not a day went by where the thought didn't flash through her mind, trailed by an exhilarating sense of hope and anticipation. But as time went on...

Just me? Is it really okay for me to be the only one rescued?

More and more, the question gnawed at her. She wasn't alone in her blessing, of course. The whole orphanage enjoyed the boons

of Mia's favor, and she had no doubt that more children would walk her own path in the future. It was, however, a path with only one door, and that door was located in the empire, open only to its own people. She'd heard enough from the father and learned enough from books to know that the situation in other nations was similar. Poverty knew no borders. Many children elsewhere still suffered as she had.

Is it...right? For just me to be happy? To be the only one...

Whenever the question arose in her mind, it would always be accompanied by a vision of Mia, centered on her intense expression and piercing gaze. Selia could certainly strive for her own happiness. It was a worthy goal. But was it enough? Could she in good faith claim it was a purpose worthy of Mia's blessing? Mia had chosen her. *Saved* her. Was she living up to this special privilege? The thought had troubled her for a long time, but now...she could finally put it to rest, because she'd found a way to do the equivalent of what Mia had done for her.

She summoned the courage to speak.

"Her Highness allowed me to enroll in her special academy...and said I will be placed under the direct instruction of the sagely headmaster. She looked me straight in the eyes."

Maybe what Mia did for Selia that day would leave an impression on the princes. Maybe it would move them to do the same. The light shed by the Great Sage of the Empire on the Newmoon District was not a mere glow, but a flame. It could spread and illuminate the frigid shadows of other nations. She could do something for other children like herself, maybe even help rescue them, as Mia had her.

So, she told her story, putting into it her heart and soul and all the passion she could muster. She talked of Mia's kindness and sincerity and the profound salvation they'd elicited, and more than that... She explained the pride she felt at being chosen, as well as her aspiration to live up to that privilege. The hand that Mia extended toward her not only pulled her up but also entrusted her with a duty to learn and improve. She needed to become someone of value for the empire and its people. In doing so, she would be an example for orphans everywhere and all who met them. Through her, other nations might come to see orphans in a new light, not as sources of wretchedness and misery but wells of untapped potential and talent.

It's on me... As someone hand-chosen by Her Highness, I must live up to her reputation...

And her fears and uncertainties solidified into an unshakable conviction.

Sion waited for Selia to leave the room before letting out the breath he'd been holding.

"An academy city that rivals Saint-Noel...and one that enrolls gifted orphans to boot. I..." He fumbled for words for a few seconds before giving up. "Don't know what to say. I think I'm still trying to work through the shock. Education for *orphans*? How many dimensions is she thinking in? The scope of her vision, it's *staggering*."

He leaned forward and grasped his forehead, as though the mere act of trying to envision the full scale of her ambitions was giving him vertigo. After a long exhalation, he tried again, this time more slowly. Feeding starving people was understandable. Tending to the physical needs of the weak was a natural duty of the nobly privileged. But to also open for them a path toward scholarly pursuits? He could probably count on one finger the number of aristocrats who'd ever had a thought like that. Meanwhile, Mia was building a second Saint-Noel, apparently determined to replicate not only its architectural significance as a city but also the ideology it subscribed to—to bestow knowledge without regard to parentage.

"It's not just an act of charity either. It's more focused. She's clearly trying to bring up a new generation of young talent who can shoulder this empire's future."

To save a life was an act of kindness. It was virtuous to the highest degree and deserving of wholehearted appreciation, but in Mia's case, she was satisfied by neither a single life nor merely saving it. Her eyes weren't even focused on the present. She saw much further into a future where the ones she helped up would learn to walk on their own, pulling the welfare of the empire and all its people forward with them.

"Ah, I give up," said Sion, throwing his hands up in defeat. "It's just too damn high. Her vantage point is all the way up there, and I'm already gasping for breath down here."

Keithwood shook his head, a little entertained by Sion's reaction. Nevertheless, he proceeded to soothe his master's frustration.

“Actually, now that I think about it,” he said as though realizing something for the first time, “maybe what she did isn’t so surprising after all.”

“Huh? How so?” asked a curious Abel.

Keithwood explained with the tonal flourish of a professional mystery solver. “It’s quite simple. Allow me to direct your attention to the young girl called Miabel. I do believe it was Princess Mia who thought to enroll her in Saint-Noel, thereby providing her with an education.”

“Ah… I see where you’re going with this,” said a nodding Sion.

Mia’s official stance—as official as such things could be, anyway—was that they were half-sisters who shared a father. Sion had never believed the story, figuring it to be a lie of utility to allow the younger girl to learn at Saint-Noel. Everyone else was aware of this as well, Rafina included, and had simply chosen to refrain from commenting. They all understood that it was something Mia did out of kindness.

“So that’s how it is…” he murmured after explaining his reasoning.

Abel, however, gawked at them.

“What? Seriously? I totally thought they were related…” he said before shaking his head. “Well, in that case, I suppose she’s probably also studying her behind off right now trying to live up to Mia’s expectations.”

They all shared a look out the window, envisioning the young girl diligently pouring over books in her room back at Saint-Noel.

Passing the Torch

During the civil war that divided the Tearmoon Empire in two, the imperial capital Lunatear, known as the City of Moonlit Beauty, remained a proud neutral zone. Even the Newmoon District, formerly a slum, maintained an atmosphere of relaxed placidity. It was as if its people had a conscious desire to preserve the ethos imbued in them by their benefactor, Princess Mia. War and chaos spread rampantly through the empire, but the district kept the encroaching darkness at bay, preserving a last bastion of tranquility. In the Newmoon District the last embers of the Great Sage of the Empire would remain until the very end.

"Oh, if it isn't Ogen. Good day to you. Are you on your way to pick up the *young lady*?"

The retired guard Ogen looked at the merchant woman, her graying hair reminding him of his own age, and answered her with a nod and a wry smile. It was an open secret in these parts that the *young lady* he was picking up was none other than the granddaughter of Princess Mia. Despite that, no one sought to do her harm, because this was the Newmoon District. Mia had always been very popular with the people here, and they continued to hold her in absolute reverence, even if she only remained with them in spirit.

"That's right. She's getting lessons with her teacher today."

Half a year had passed since the empire's last princess had arrived at the imperial capital. Even after delivering her into the safety of Mia's loyal subjects, Ogen continued to stay with her, diligently continuing his duties as her last remaining guard. He had nowhere else to go. His wife, may she rest in peace, had passed on, and his children had all gone off to start families of their own. The thought of fading peacefully in the presence of his grandkids was not without its allure, but in the end, he'd decided to spend his remaining days *serving*, as he'd always done. His last breaths, he resolved, would be drawn in the name of loyalty.

"Here, bring this to her then, if you don't mind."

The merchant woman handed him a small parcel. He knew what it contained. This shop sold pastries in the shape of a young girl, commonly known as Miacakes. A beloved delicacy here.

"Thank you very much. You're too kind, you give her a box of these every time."

"Oh please. Prin— I mean the young lady's grandma. She was always good to us... Kept telling us she loved our pastries... Every time she came here she'd buy some from me."

The wrinkles at the sides of her eyes deepened as she gazed into the past. He nodded to her in respect and took his leave, leaving the woman to savor her nostalgia in peace. Once outside, he quickened his pace, deftly maneuvering through the twists and turns of the district's aged roads. Eventually, he came upon his goal—a building tucked into a dimly lit alley.

At a glance, it looked like just another dilapidated house. Viewed from the right perspective, however, its merits would suddenly become evident. The building had been carefully selected for its location. Residing deep within a dingy back street, it was hidden from plain view, but the narrow alley was no dead end. Far from it, there were a number of routes that led to major streets in the area, and all of them were mazelike, filled with twists and turns that would confuse the unfamiliar. In other words, in the case of a surprise attack, the building's location afforded ample routes of escape, each convoluted enough to shake off pursuers in the process. Furthermore, it was situated in the heart of the district, so if any suspicious individuals appeared, there was plenty of time for word to spread around town and reach the ears of the building's residents, allowing them to prepare in advance.

The people of the Newmoon District all adored Mia. Consequently, their eyes and ears were primed to notice any signs of ill intent toward her kin, ensuring that notice would be widely circulated as soon as any would-be assailants entered the area. The district was united in their desire to protect Miabel. As the last remaining bearer of the imperial blood, there was no shortage of people hoping to spill it. She had no choice but to live a life of constant vigilance, spending most of her time in hiding. Even her mannerisms had to change. Forced to relinquish the stately conduct she'd been brought up with, she learned to behave in an androgynous fashion to hide her identity. Her hair was kept long. If push came to shove, she could cut it short and take on a male

persona to elude the eyes of captors.

It hurts my heart to see... In better times, she'd be waited upon as the up-and-coming matriarch of an empire. But now, her rank only paints a target on her back...

The grimness of her circumstances...the heartbreaking tragedy of an innocent princess doomed to a life on the run... It was apparent in the gaze of every denizen of Newmoon. Everyone...except herself, who never failed to greet them with a spring in her step and a smile on her lips. Her bubbly enthusiasm radiated in staunch defiance of her objective reality, and it served as a beacon of comfort for all those around her. She might never know how much she did to soothe the heartache of the district's residents.

Ogen approached the decrepit building, greeted the watcher near the door, and stepped in.

"Excuse me, Mr. Ludwig. I've come to pick up Miss Bel."

He was greeted by a sweet scent that tickled his nose. It was one that he knew Bel liked very much—the rich aroma of hot sweet milk.

"Ah, Sir Ogen, you're here..."

A spectacled man stood at the back of the room, his features suggesting his age was between "middle" and "old." Once the Great Sage of the Empire's right-hand man, the loyal Ludwig was currently studying a pot of milk as it sat over a fire. After a few seconds, he bent down, removed a single piece of wood from the flame with a pair of tongs, and nodded in satisfaction at what now was presumably a perfect amount of heat for warming the milk. Evidently, age had not whittled away his meticulous nature. Even in the kitchen, he was still the fastidiously astute man he'd always been. Ogen chuckled at the sight.

"My apologies for making you come all this way every time," Ludwig continued with a rueful grimace. "I wish I could pick her up myself, but... I find I am ill-suited to dealing with any...violent contingencies."

"As well you should be. It's hard enough finding a job these days, Mr. Ludwig. Stop trying to take mine. The Princess Guard is with Miss Bel, you can count on us to keep her safe. The rest of us might have passed on, but their spirits are still here." Ogen slammed a fist into his chest. "Right here. They keep me going strong." He grinned. "One of them in particular, belonging to the

empire's finest, has a way of keeping me on my toes. He entrusted us with her safety, and I'm going to receive a hell of a welcome on the other side if I slack off."

"Yes, yes... He did, didn't he? You bear the weight of his resolve as well... " Ludwig's eyes narrowed wistfully. "It's been...an odd experience. I can't seem to wrap my mind around it. The fact that he's just...gone."

Ogen grimaced at the budding melancholy in the room and quickly tried to steer the conversation toward a lighter topic.

"Speaking of which, how is Miss Bel doing?"

Ludwig smiled with resignation.

"The same as always. She dozed off in the middle of her lesson."

He pointed toward a desk, on which rested a plump cheek slightly deformed by the hand the girl was snoozing on. There was a little smile on her lips, and she slept with the calm, even breathing of someone thoroughly enjoying their nap.

"As I've come to discover, Miss Bel doesn't have much of an affinity for studying," said Ludwig as he continued to prepare the hot milk that was supposed to be a reward for a day of diligent learning.

Somewhere out there was probably a Mia-shaped soul loudly protesting the discrepancy in their treatments.

"I must say, Mr. Ludwig, you've grown very soft toward Miss Bel. Didn't you say she had to earn that cup of hot milk every time? By finishing the day's lesson?" asked Ogen as if the ghost of Mia had, in her profound indignance, clawed her way back into this realm and possessed his body to voice her grievances.

Ludwig scratched his head and made an awkward face.

"Ah, well... That's true, of course, but, erm... I remember Her Highness Princess Mia used to always snack on something sweet when she was deep in thought... So I figured perhaps Miss Bel would appreciate the same. Maybe feel a little more motivated to study if there's something sweet to enjoy."

That was no mere pot of hot milk over the fire, by the way. It was being prepared using a recipe given directly by the head chef with a long and proud career of gratifying imperial taste buds. Fresh milk was of the essence in bringing out its rich flavor, and procuring it in the current chaos that enveloped the empire was no easy feat. Still, Ludwig never failed to have a cup ready for his

student.

...You could almost see a transparent outline of Mia jumping up and down in outrage at the terrible injustice on display.

"Besides..." added Ludwig, his eyes growing gentle. "Considering the adversity...the ghastly fate that Miss Bel endures...surely, she deserves a little happiness."

Ogen nodded in agreement.

"That she does... These are some tough times she's living through, but I've never heard a single complaint from her. It's a virtue of hers, and a damn fine one at that. Passed down from Her Highness, no doubt..."

However, they all knew that Bel's outward lack of misery was not proof of its absence within. She'd lost both her parents, most of her retainers, and almost her own life...and at such a young age too. How could that not leave a mark on her soul? Even now, death looms ever near, every shadow and alley potentially hiding a threat to her life... Like Ludwig, Ogen couldn't help but want this poor little girl, trapped in a vortex of tragedy, to enjoy as many pleasures as they could afford her.

"In any case, since you're here, let's wake our sleeping beauty," said Ludwig as he removed the pot from the fire and poured out a cup of steaming hot milk. Then, he walked over to Bel's napping form and gently spoke to her. "Miss Bel... Miss Bel, it's time to wake up. The hot milk is ready."

"Mmm... Mm?"

The first part of her that stirred was her nose. It twitched and seemed to, by sheer force of will, pull her head in the direction of the aroma. Only then did her eyes open and she looked around.

"Oh, Mr. Ogen." She flashed him a bright smile. "You're here already."

She got to her feet and lowered her head.

"Thank you very much for coming to pick me up so faithfully."

"You're very welcome, Miss Bel. It's an honor." He returned a fond smile. "Also, before I forget, I've got something for you from the market."

He held out the parcel of sweets from the merchant woman.

"Oooo, that looks so good!" She took it, flipped it over a few times, and looked up. "Who is it from? I have to go tell them thank you."

Before she got her answer, Ludwig whispered softly.

“May you never lose the part of you that spoke those words, Miss Bel...”

“Huh?”

She blinked at him in confusion. His expression softened.

“Not forgetting what others have done for you... Not taking their generosity for granted...and always striving to return their goodwill in kind. This is an essential trait to have for those who rule. Your grandmother Mia never allowed herself to forget the favors others did for her.”

“Really? She never forgot?”

Bel tilted her head curiously. The two men both nodded firmly at her.

“Yes,” answered Ludwig, “and it seems that you’ve inherited that most virtuous part of her. So please, if you can, hold on to that kindness. Treasure it. And let it guide your actions.”

Ogen hummed his agreement. Bel’s bright smile was nothing short of a beacon in the sea of darkness that had swallowed this land. The radiance of the Great Sage of the Empire had been passed on to Bel. He could see it in her—a torch passed to her by her grandmother. It still burned strong, giving off a brilliant light that warmed his soul.

“Okay. I will.”

With a bashful giggle, the young Miabel scratched her head, the gesture profoundly endearing. Then she gleefully picked up the steaming cup and, fairly certain that the adults in the room had succumbed to her adorable charm, was about to enjoy a post-nap milk break before packing up for the day when Ludwig interrupted with, “Now then, let us resume the lesson.”

He eyed her through his glasses, whose lenses gave off a sharp flash.

“...Eh?”

Her mouth hung open, waiting for an inflow of warm liquid that did not come.

“We’re not done with today’s lesson yet. You can drink that while listening, but let’s get through the rest of it, shall we? Once we’re done, you can have a break.”

Mr. Ludwig was no pushover. He was a kind guardian but a strict teacher. Lectures would be given, and lessons would be taught. Learning came first.

“Huh? B-But— Huh?”

She looked at Ogen with pleading eyes but received only a reluctant shake of the head.

“Your studies are important, Miss Bel. Try your best. I’ll wait until you’re finished.”

Those days Bel spent with Ludwig were a happy time for her, and though they ended tragically, and far too soon, she would always remember them very fondly.

“Milady... Milady...”

Bel felt someone gently shake her. With a soft groan of effort, she lifted one droopy eyelid. As the blurriness cleared, the image of a girl standing over her came into focus.

“Ah... Miss Lynsha...”

She pressed her palms to her eyes and gave them a good rub before looking around to find that Ludwig’s old but beloved room was gone, replaced by a library filled with finely crafted bookshelves.

“Where... Where am— Oh...”

Only then did she remember. This was Saint-Noel Academy, and she was in its great library.

“Right...”

Like a single, sad snowflake, the word fell softly from her lips and melted away.

“What’s wrong? You seem a little down. Did you have a bad dream?” asked a concerned Lynsha.

Bel looked down and said, “No, not bad. Just, sad...” Then, as if that had been a slip of the tongue, she hastily added, “Oh, you see, um, I was studying in my dream, and I finished... I thought I was finally done...so now, I feel very sad.”

Her eyes shifted toward the pile of unfinished assignments on the table in front of her.

“I see...”

Lynsha studied Bel’s face. An idea came to her...but she quickly dismissed it with a shake of her head.

“I’m sorry to hear that, but you do have to finish studying here in the earthly world too. Let’s get the rest of this done, shall we?”

Bel groaned.

“Okay...”

Despite her obvious reluctance, she blinked a few times, gave her cheeks an invigorating smack, and stared down her book-

shaped foes. Remembering something, she turned back to Lynsha.

"Thank you for helping me study, Miss Lynsha," she said with a bright smile.

Taken aback by this sudden gesture of appreciation, Lynsha found herself without words.

Ah, damn it... This girl... That was a cheap shot. How am I supposed to be strict with her after that?

In a way, what Bel had done was perfectly normal. When someone does something for you, you say thank you. It was a natural thing, so common a courtesy it hardly seemed one at all. But doing it *all* the time... Saying it even when it *didn't* feel natural...was a feat few could manage.

To Bel, Lynsha was someone who was constantly pestering her to study. Someone who forced her to do something she really didn't want to do. Even if she fully understood that it was for her own sake, it couldn't be easy to *thank* Lynsha for subjecting her to what probably amounted to mild torture. A bitter pill, no matter how curative it was, was still bitter. Bel, however, never failed to express her gratitude.

Every day, she thanked Lynsha for helping her study. And it didn't stop there. With tireless diligence, she made sure to say thank you to every act of kindness and goodwill she enjoyed, no matter how routine or trifling it was. Because of this, Lynsha knew she could never hate the girl, not even if she tried. At the same time, it also meant she would never abandon her, no matter how infuriatingly frequently she slacked off when studying.

"Let's give it another try, milady. I'm sure Princess Mia would want to know you're hard at work. I bet she's thinking about you right now, worrying over how you're doing with your studies. The fact that she had you stay behind here in the academy... I think it's proof that she has high expectations for you..."

Lynsha gazed distantly in the direction of the Tearmoon Empire, where Mia currently was. She could envision the princess sitting in silent worry, wondering if Bel was keeping up with her studies. At the same time, she could also sort of envision Mia frolicking on the deck of a pleasure yacht, concerns about Bel thrown entirely to the salty winds. She frowned. That second image seemed uncomfortably plausible.

"Hmm... Do you really think so?"

She looked down to find the same frown mirrored on Bel,

who'd apparently imagined something similar. Lynsha quickly shook the troubling image out of her mind and declared with confidence, "Absolutely! There's no doubt in my mind! I know for sure that she's worried about milady! Which is why we should finish up your studies for the day. Oh, I know! How about we go get something tasty once you're done? It'll be a reward for how hard you've worked!"

Despite the jarring shift in topic, Bel perked up immediately.

"Really?! Can we get something sweet?"

"Sure, why not? What would you like?"

"Hm... In that case..." Bel considered her options for a moment before answering with a bright smile, "I think I'd like some hot sweet milk..."

By the way, if anyone is wondering what Mia was *actually* doing...

"Phew... Aaaaah... This feels absolutely wonderful..."

She was enjoying some quality bath time. She'd worked up a good sweat horseback riding, and now, submerged in the water's relaxing warmth, she was eager to see how much progress she'd made. Her hand went to her tummy, and she squeezed. Her expression of eager anticipation quickly waned.

"...How terribly odd. I spent so much time on that horse, so why does it still feel flabby? Ugh, this isn't fair! I worked so hard, and I got nothing out of it! I am *not* okay with this!"

"Don't worry, milady."

Her aggrievance was answered by Anne, who walked in with a towel and small bottle.

"I learned from Miss Chloe that apparently, if you put salt on a cloth and use it to rub your body, it'll firm up the looser areas and help you slim down."

"Really?!"

"Also, I heard that half body baths are good too. You sit so the water comes up to your hips, and then, by slowly sweating out all the bad substances in your body, you'll get skinnier."

"My! Baths can do that?"

Anne nodded vigorously.

"We're not out of options yet, so don't give up hope. There's still time left before the cruise, so let's give it our best shot!"

"Oh... Anne... You... You really are my most loyal subject!"

Thus went the tale of the Great Sage of the Empire and her epic quest to burn all the bad F.A.T. substances out of her body before the day of the cruise.

Oh, and it worked in the end. So, good for her.

Mia's Diary of Delusional Dreams

The Fourth Day of the Fifth Month

Now that the student council elections are over, I can enjoy my meals in peace.

Today's dish was sauteed moon turkey. The mushrooms on top were juicy and really good. Desert was a tart made from continental strawberries. Now I've officially tried everything on the academy's desert menu. Mission complete.

I feel like we need some more variety though. Time to see how my plan to overhaul the cafeteria menu is going. The people demand reformation!

The Fifth Day of the Fifth Month

Today, I had some really rich fettuccine Alfredo. There's a slight tartness to it that keeps the flavor interesting. I just can't get enough of it. A masterpiece. Highly recommended!

For desert, I decided to start at the top of the menu again and do another lap. Which means I had Belluga chestnut cake. It's shaped like a little mountain and covered in lots of chestnut sauce, which makes my tummy happy.

Cake really is the king of all foods, isn't it?

The Sixth Day of the Fifth Month

Today, I tried this stuff called "fruit salad." It had lots of sweet fruits, which were really tasty. The honey-based dressing was really good too. It is called a "salad," which originally put me off. I regret this lapse in judgment. So I've made a resolution to keep an open mind and be more adventurous with trying out food.

The Eighteenth Day of the Fifth Month

I've been writing about nothing but food lately, so I decided to be serious and write a proper entry today.

After receiving Ludwig's message, I immediately began the journey back to the capital. Currently, I'm in my carriage, and we're

a few days away from Lunatear. The journey must have taken a toll on me or something, because I don't remember drifting off, but I woke up in Anne's lap. I had a wonderful dream while I was sleeping though.

In my dream I was a schoolteacher! There was this really big library. It was *magnificent*. Made Saint-Noel's look like a joke in comparison. There were lots of flowers decorating the place, and there were books from wall to wall. Oh, if only it hadn't been a dream, or I'd bring Chloe and Elise and show them the place. They'd love it. It was *that* amazing.

Anyway, I was there teaching lots and lots of people. Even that stupid four-eyes who always makes fun of me was impressed by how smart I was. Imagine that! Ludwig admitting defeat! Oh, sweet moons, it felt so good! So so good!

Frankly, I always thought that teaching other people stuff sounded like a chore, but now that I've tried it, it's actually pretty easy. I must be a natural, because everyone was solving their equations so quickly. Whenever I explained something, they got it immediately. It was that simple.

It's honestly a little scary how brilliant I am.

And it got me thinking. I never considered the idea before, but maybe I'd actually be a pretty good teacher. It feels like an option worth exploring. The dream felt particularly real too. I might have an innate gift for this kind of thing. With my expert instruction, maybe the research into cold-resistant wheat will go faster too!

I should discuss this with Ludwig. I'm sure he'll be on board.

The Eighteenth Day of the Fifth Month, Night

My plan to personally wield the pointing stick at my academy has unfortunately fallen through. Anne was opposed to the idea on the basis that it'd make me too busy and she was worried about my health. Understandable, but still, it's a shame.

I must say though, she was *adamant*. I've never seen her try so hard to stop me from doing something. She must *really* care about my health.

I'm so lucky to have her.

In any case, that's that. If Anne says no, then it'll have to be a no. I suppose I'll clean up all the other problems first, like the famine and the Chaos Serpents and stuff, and once I have some

more free time, I'll give this idea some thought.

After all, it'd be a terrible waste to let all my talent for being an educator go unused.

Afterword

Greetings. It's been a while. To those who are new, I'm Mochitsuki. Did you enjoy the fourth volume? I certainly hope you did.

Now, I know this is a bit abrupt, but...

Congratulations on the stage production!

So yes, it's exactly what you're thinking. There is a stage play in the works for Tearmoon. Honestly, I still have trouble wrapping my head around the fact that it got a manga adaptation, and now this! It's like I've been sent to a different dimension. I can barely keep up. I've spent a lot of time lately being dumbfounded.

Thinking back to my time in high school, I remember being really into a certain steampunk dating video game set in the Taisho era. Every spring and summer, I'd go watch the musical stage shows put on by the voice actors. While I was there, I'd spend what measly allowance I'd managed to scrounge up on the sort-of-pricy uchiwa hand fans, t-shirts, and bromide photos that were for sale... Then, with my bag full of purchased goods, I'd head home, my heart still soaring from the incredible experience of the revue—like a dream come to life.

I think there's something unique about stage shows. A special atmosphere or something that feeds your excitement. In those moments before the curtain rises, when you're sitting there watching the seats around you fill up one by one...and then the overhead lights dim, and a spotlight turns on... You know a dream is about to come alive on stage.

Even after the show ended, I kept listening to CDs I bought until I knew them by heart. I'd copy them over to microdrives and bring them to school with me... Good times.

Now that Tearmoon has a stage play, I can't help but feel my hopes ballooning. If the stage play is a big hit, maybe we can get a musical after that, and maybe even a soundtrack release. I'm feeling an itch right now to listen to a character song for Mia.

Mia: “A musical... Well! Clearly, I’ll have to unveil my beautiful voice in that case! Ahem. Aaah— Aaaaah—”

Anne: “Oh my goodness! Milady! You’re not just a great dancer, but you’re great at singing too!”

Mia: “Oho ho. I can write lyrics too. I~ am~ a~ smart~ and~ beautiful~ princess~. Oho ho ho. See? The words come to me so easily, just like that. I think there might be a latent poet in me too. Wouldn’t you agree?”

Right. We’ll let Mia go back to enjoying her deserted island life. Little does she know though, her carefree time under the sun is about to take a bewildering turn in the next volume when she inadvertently digs up a terrible secret that had been buried under the sands of time... It’ll leave her flustered and confused, which basically just means she’ll be her usual clueless self.

I hope I’ll see you again next time.

Lastly, a few words of appreciation.

I’d like to thank the illustrator, Gilse, for their adorable artwork. Your cover art is always amazing, and this time is no different. They’re filled with intricate details, and I always look forward to seeing them.

I’d also like to thank my editor, F, who has always provided me with lots of help.

Thank you to my family. Your support is always appreciated. I’m happy to report that the fourth volume has safely made it to publication.

Finally, to all the readers who picked up this book, thank you for tagging along with Mia on this journey of hers. I hope it has been an enjoyable experience.

Let us meet again.

F.A.T.
SMUG
SMUG
"REWARD YOURSELF FOR A JOB WELL DONE" IS AN OFT-USED PHRASE.
TO THAT END, I THINK I DESERVE SOME SPECIALTY CAKE TODAY.
PRINCESS MIA, I READ ABOUT THIS IN A BOOK ONCE.
ALL THE HORSEBACK RIDING AND DANCING, ALONG WITH DIETING, FINALLY PAID OFF, AND MIA SUCCESSFULLY LOST WEIGHT!
IF YOU RELAX AFTER A DIET AND EAT CARELESSLY, YOU'LL END UP GAINING MORE WEIGHT THAN YOU LOST.
EUGH...
I-IS THAT SO...
IN FACT... I THINK YOU'VE...
THEN YOU'LL BE MISTAKEN FOR FARM SWINE AND GET SOLD OFF.
?!
GOT SOME NICE PORKY CURVES ALREADY...
BULGE
MI-LADY!
SNAP OUT OF IT!
Skip her off!
Skip her off!
BLUB
BLUB
GASP!
AFTER WAKING UP FROM HER NIGHTMARE, MIA SPENT A GOOD WHILE SNIVELING IN HORROR.
4
Tearmoon Empire
Vol.4
THANK YOU FOR PURCHASING THE BOOK!
もりみ
Morimi

Bonus Short Story

The Head Chef and the Vegetable Cookie

Let us tell the story of a regretful man.

It begins in Ganudos with a normal man who'd led a normal life as the owner of a small tavern. His name was Musta Waggman, and he was a bear of a man. Possessing a knack for cooking, he offered a multitude of seafood delicacies on his menu that, along with his mild disposition, kept customers coming back again and again. His tavern was a true favorite among the locals.

One day, a bit past noon when traffic calmed a little, a man stepped into his tavern. He looked like a traveling merchant; the thick clothes he wore suggested he didn't live nearby. As he lowered himself into a counter seat a deep sigh escaped his lips.

"What a fine mess..."

"Oh? What's this?" Musta, who'd approached to take his order, noticed his troubled expression. "Is something wrong?"

"Wrong? You bet it is."

"What is it?"

"It's the damn empire, of course! I swear, I don't know what this new regime and it's so-called 'revolutionary army' think they're doing, but they've made a real mess of the place. It's nothing but wasteland for miles and miles. I went there thinking I might be able to set up some sort of shop, but nope, not a chance. The whole country has gone to the dogs. They need to purge it, or something. Raze it to the ground. There's too much of the old badness left to make room for anything decent..."

Another sigh followed this pronouncement, even deeper than the last one. Then he finally took a good look around the room. His eyes stopped on the row of wooden plates hung on the wall, which detailed the tavern's offerings.

"Huh, this menu of yours... You from Tearmoon?" he asked, his tone growing more affable.

"That I am. Good eye, sir."

“Hah, I knew it. I’m the same. Whereabouts in Tearmoon are you from?”

“The capital, born and raised. A city boy to the bone, I am.”

“Aaah. Well then. Wasn’t easy for you, was it? What with the famine, and the war... I heard the capital was pure hell.”

“Ha ha. Actually, I moved here just before the revolution began, so I didn’t have to go through the worst of it,” answered Musta with a calm smile.

The man looked down and shook his head.

“Good for you then. You wouldn’t have wanted to. As for me, I’m from the sticks. We didn’t get it too bad there either. Lucky us, I guess. I’ve been to the capital plenty of times though. Were you running a diner there too?” he asked, gazing around again. “Maybe I went there, before.”

Musta smiled and scratched the back of his head before answering with some reluctance.

“Not exactly. I worked at the Whitemoon Palace.”

“Whitemoon Palace? Damn... Have you cooked for the emperor, then?”

“I have indeed... Didn’t last long though. Lost the job after a few years.”

“Long enough, I think, still damn impressive. So, what? You telling me you can make fancy court food too?”

“Not without preparation. I suppose I can manage something if you want to place a special order, but it’ll take time. And...it’ll end up costing you a good coin or two.”

The man fell silent for a contemplative moment. Cuisine served in the imperial court was not the kind of food one could find just anywhere. This might be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. In the end, however, he shook his head.

“Nah, I’ll pass. For now at least. If I make a good profit off a big deal, I’ll come back and order one of them court dishes from you. Today... Yeah, I think I’ll just have this ambermoon tomato stew.”

Musta’s eyes widened slightly at the man’s choice.

“Right then. One ambermoon tomato stew, coming right up.”

He retreated into the kitchen. Soon after, he reappeared with a gently steaming bowl. The tomatoes, simmered to melting, were joined by a number of other vegetables that had received the same thorough treatment, soaked in the savory juices from the thick slices of fish—added as a Ganudos special. The merchant spooned

up a mouthful and, almost in spite of himself, let out a yelp of surprise.

"Damn, this is good... This is *good*. So this is the work of a court chef, huh?"

Musta left the man to his stew.

After finishing, he set down the bowl with a satisfied exhalation, then cocked his head. "Say, if you're so good at cooking, how'd you lose your job? This is some fine food. I can't imagine there are a ton of people out there with your skills..."

"...Funny you ask. As a matter of fact, it was because of this very dish." He tapped the now-empty bowl. "Ambermoon tomato stew."

Normally, Musta was not a man to talk about the past. What was past was gone, and there weren't many happy memories to dredge up anyway. But a chance encounter with a fellow countryman, along with his coincidental order, had softened Musta's inhibitions. He felt a strange bond, as if there was some invisible hand of fate working to bring the two of them together in this moment.

"One day when I served it to the princess."

Memories of that day resurfaced in his mind, as vivid as ever. Though the tomatoes were a pain to prepare, they were said to be highly nutritious and good for people's health. He of course knew that the princess hated them. The head chef before him hadn't been able to prepare them well, and the bitter taste had stuck with the young princess ever since in the form of a culinary scar. As a result, she grimaced at any mention of ambermoon tomatoes.

Musta, however, was worried about the princess. Specifically, he found her diet troubling. She was a picky eater, and ate far more sweets than anything else. That couldn't be good for her health. Every so often, he'd try to mix some vegetables into her meals, but his efforts were to no avail. Time and again, she'd pick them out and leave them uneaten.

"Really? She didn't like this?" asked the merchant, glancing incredulously at the bowl. "It's so damn good. I guess she was even worse than the rumors made her out to be."

Musta sighed and gazed out the window with a wistful smile, his eyes half-closed in reminiscence.

"It's true that Her Highness was a girl with a...discriminating palate. When it came to food, she loved and hated with equal

fervor... It certainly caused plenty of headaches."

"Yeah, I'd imagine it did. She's known as the 'selfish princess who ruined Tearmoon' after all. Must have been tough cooking for her. Hell, I bet you were glad to leave by the end of it all."

That elicited a shake of Musta's head.

"No, not exactly glad. I left with...regret." His smile turned sad. "In the end, I walked out the gates of the Whitemoon Palace without ever hearing Her Highness say she enjoyed my cooking. As a chef...I regret that to this day."

"Ah, don't beat yourself up. This is the spoiled princess of legend we're talking about. Getting a word of praise out of her was probably like pulling teeth."

"She could indeed be quite difficult. Hardly the type to eat something just because you served it to her. But as head chef...it was my duty to ensure the members of the imperial family dined on meals that were good for their health. Even now, I still wonder if there might have been a way... If I could have tried harder..."

It was, perhaps, pointless to theorize. It might never have been possible. But, even so, even if there had been no chance at all... Musta nevertheless felt a bone-deep sense of regret.

"Maybe it was my fault. *I* was too stubborn. I kept trying to make her eat her vegetables, but maybe there was a smarter way to go about it. A way to cook them so she'd want to eat them. I always wonder..."

He was confident in the taste of his dishes, but somewhere in that confidence, he couldn't help but think there had been too much *him* and not enough *her*. That he focused too much on getting her to eat his cooking rather than cooking something she'd enjoy. He could still remember how the little princess, the sight of her scowl still fresh in his mind as if he had seen it just yesterday, had stared daggers at his creations.

And...he could still remember how he'd felt when he heard that she'd been executed. When he heard what they said of her last moments there at the guillotine, her cheeks sunken, her body gaunt...

"I wish...I could have cooked one last meal for her. Something good, at least, to send her on her way..."

Musta wasn't particularly fond of Princess Mia. He simply...pitied her. There was something profoundly sad about the thought of her locked in a dungeon, fed only barely edible rubbish.

If he'd been there, even under the difficult circumstances, he could have made something for her to eat that was at least decent.

Realizing he'd retreated too far into his thoughts, he shook his head and smiled.

"I have to say, looking back on it, it all feels like a dream. Me, in the palace, working as head chef for the empire's royal family... It's hard to believe that actually happened. And..." He sighed. "Even harder to believe that empire no longer exists. Hah. Life is really something, isn't it? You can never tell what's around the corner."

The two of them shared a worldly smile...then parted ways. Their paths never crossed again.

This was the story of a normal man and the life he'd led. A life that had reached the lofty station of head chef of the imperial court in the Tearmon Empire before concluding as the owner of a small tavern in a small country. It was not an unhappy life. It had its ups and downs, triumphs and setbacks. It was, in other words, normal. The small, stinging thorn of regret in his heart included.

Now, let us spin the dial and turn over the hourglass, so that time may flow anew.

Let us tell the story of a great man.

He was a renowned chef who left a lasting mark on the continent's culinary history. He was a man who took that small thorn of regret in his heart and, through hard work and perseverance, pulled it free and cast it off. This is the story of *his* life.

"Head chef, are you, um...sure about this?"

Faced with this question from one of the junior cooks, the head chef of the imperial court, Musta Waggman, cocked his brow.

"'Sure'? Sure about what, exactly?"

"Uh, well... Didn't we just serve Her Highness a dish with vegetables in it? And, um... Didn't she flip the plate over?"

"We have a duty to ensure the imperial family remains in good health. So long as she eats even a little, it's worth our time and effort to keep making such dishes."

Noontime today had been a battle as always. Mia, refusing to eat her lunch, had stormed away and returned to her room without so much as a bite. Not too long ago, however, she'd poked her head into the royal kitchen again, presumably driven by her empty

stomach.

"I want some moonberry pie," she'd said.

The demand was, of course, immediately shot down by Musta, who declared, "No lunch, no dessert." Snacking without having eaten a proper meal was out of the question. After some wrangling, she eventually capitulated to his stern insistence, sullenly agreeing to eat "the leftovers from lunch or whatever. I don't care. Just bring me anything."

"This is good," Musta said in the kitchen. "This way, we can get her to eat at least a little bit of healthy food. It's a worthwhile effort..."

He stubbornly repeated the sentiment, cementing his public position on the matter, though he was aware that behind all his talk about duty and worth was a growing sense of resignation. Strip away the bravado, and he'd have to admit that deep down, even he couldn't make himself care much anymore. It was, perhaps, inevitable. Every meal he served, he'd prepared with all his heart and soul. One could only watch so many of one's darling creations be overturned before something inside gave way. Like a soldier riding into a losing battle, he brought the dish from the kitchen to her table... only to hear something that made him doubt his ears. Mia *complimenting* his cooking, telling him it was "delicious." She took a bite of bread, then a sip of stew, and—sweet moons high above—*tears* started streaming down her face.

As the initial shock wore off, elation filled Musta's chest, and he was gripped by a sudden loquacity. Pride moved his tongue, leading him to ramble a little about the culinary techniques he employed. He soon caught himself and glanced at her nervously. To his further surprise, she seemed to be listening. Intently, at that.

"That seems like a lot of work. Why do you do it that way?" she asked with interest.

The earnestness of the question struck a chord deep within him. He stood up straighter, bowed, and answered, "For us servants, ensuring the nutrition of the royal family is as important a duty as any." The words flowed naturally from his lips, uttered so frequently they were becoming rote.

"How terribly considerate of you. Know that I am most grateful for your efforts."

Her response, though just as natural in tone, was anything but rote. Rather, it was an expression of thanks so genuine as to sound

alien in her voice. It struck another chord, but this one felt different. It came with a stinging discomfort, as if the chord was tugging against a small thorn lodged deep in his heart...

From that day forward, Princess Mia never again left her meals unfinished. In fact, she didn't just eat them. She *savored* them.

"Simply delicious! These vegetables, they melt in my mouth! The seasoning is marvelous, a perfect balance of sweet and sour! Your skills are absolutely incredible!"

Day after day, Musta was showered with praise for his cooking. She commended his technique, thanked him profusely, and even began to take a keen interest in the culinary arts herself. In particular, she demonstrated a fascination with recipes involving mushrooms, and went so far as to ask him to teach her a few. Their frequent conversations led to the forming of a bond, and Musta began thinking of Mia almost as a daughter.

After that, the pains came more often. It was never more than a brief twinge, but always in his core, and always coincided with thoughts of the princess. It wasn't guilt—not guilt from slacking off in his cooking, at least. He knew that he prepared every dish with the utmost care and could declare with an unburdened conscience that he picked only the healthiest ingredients to make Mia's meals. Nevertheless, the pains kept coming, and he couldn't help but wonder... had he really made every effort to hone his cooking? To optimize the texture of vegetables for the delicate palate of a young princess? Was there *craft* to his work as well as commitment?

Every innocent compliment of Mia's caused something bitter to stir within. Eventually, he had to admit he knew what the feeling was—guilt. He didn't know why he felt it, but it was becoming ever-present. Driven by its sting, he began conducting further research into his profession. Until then, he'd always been a first-rate cook. His knowledge and skills were both of the highest caliber, more than sufficient for even his station—the Whitemoon Palace's head chef.

But therein lay the problem. His exceptionality was as a cook, but his job required him to excel as a chef. His cooking, while superb, had firmly abided by the methods and rules he'd learned from his master. He'd never thought to doubt, to cook outside the box. Unconcerned—unconscious, even—of those he fed and their individuality, he'd failed to explore beyond the realm of his own

“common sense.” In his mind, the circumstances and unique needs of the palates he served had made way for his fixation on maintaining his technical prowess and his position. He’d scaled the peak, yes, but he’d lost sight of the horizon. That had been his life so far.

Once he began researching the culinary arts for Mia, however, his cooking changed drastically. He began using cooking methods he’d never been taught. He experimented with unfamiliar cookware and followed developments in the design of pots and pans, incorporating the latest styles into his workflow. Days turned into weeks, and weeks into months, but his diligence never faltered. Then, two years after Mia began attending school at Saint-Noel, the day finally arrived.

“Her Highness...seems to be fatigued.”

Rumors of the princess’s physical condition circulated through the Whitemoon Palace’s kitchen, making their way to Musta’s ears.

“Yes. I heard she spent a few days in the village of a minor tribe in the Sealence Forest. Their unfamiliar lifestyle must have taken a toll on her...”

“I see. That’s rather worrying.”

Mia was a princess among princesses. The life of forest dwellers must have been nigh otherworldly for her. Considering the undoubtedly-difficult process of adapting to such a drastically different environment, she’d probably had trouble sleeping and likely ate very little. Musta found himself overcome with sympathy for her tribulations.

...Of course, the truth was that she had been wholly satisfied with the Lulu Tribe’s welcome and had wolfed down feast after feast without the slightest hesitation before enjoying long, undisturbed stretches of round-bellied slumber. Musta, though, had no idea about any of that.

So young, yet so committed to her duties. What an exemplary young princess she is. I wish there was something more I could do for her...

Such thoughts occupied his mind as he made his way to the cafeteria, where he found her trying—and failing—to hide a wide-mouthed yawn. He let her rub away the drowsy tears from her eyes before approaching her.

“Welcome back, Your Highness. You seem rather tired.”

“Do I?” She gave him a weak smile. “I suppose I am. I’ve been

quite busy surveying Princess Town and such. It must have worn me down a little, so some indulgence would be greatly appreciated."

"Indulgence? What kind?"

Mia smiled at the puzzled chef and said jokingly, "Oh, I don't know. The kind that involves an all-sweets breakfast, maybe?"

Something clicked for Musta. It occurred to him that this must have been how knights felt before they rode into battle. Without another word, he retreated to the kitchen. Before long he reappeared holding his masterwork—the Vegetable Cake! Made by grinding ambermoon carrots into a fine paste and adding mini kabocha squashes along with ambermoon tomatoes. Only a dab of seasoning—just a dab, with minimal sugar—was added so to preserve as much of the natural flavor as possible. This was no simple creation; it represented the culmination of tireless research and endless iterations. A miraculous coexistence of nutrition and palatability, it was a culinary breakthrough. And it was his answer to the challenge his conscience had posed him.

As a matter of fact, he'd pre-prepared it in secret. His vegetable cake was not something that could be whipped up on the fly. This way it would be ready for Mia's consumption whenever she showed up. Unfortunately, he'd failed to work up the nerve to present his creation to her. After all, who had been the one to pester her with incessant reminders to eat proper meals? Him of course. He was the one who'd sternly turned down her requests for sweets and reprimanded her about how eating too much sugar was bad for her. To go so far in his insistence, then present her with a cake? It would be terribly awkward and embarrassing. The thought alone made him quiver with discomfort.

The sight of her tired face blew all that away. He set the vegetable cake down before her, feeling resolve gather within him.

"My! Th-This is..." Mia stared agape at the pastry. "Cake?! This early in the morning?! A-Are you sure this is okay?"

She looked up at him with disbelief in her eyes. He nodded solemnly, the gesture almost a bow.

"Yes. Your Highness seemed tired, so... we made this for you."

He allowed himself this small lie. His resolve hadn't hardened quite enough for him to admit to keeping it hidden in the kitchen out of embarrassment.

"B-But, isn't it bad for me to be eating sweets all the time? I

remember you said something like that before." she responded with genuine confusion.

He felt a rush of delight at knowing she'd taken his advice to heart. His expression softened, and his chest expanded with pride as he explained the special trick he'd used for the cake.

"I decided to challenge myself. That cake is a new creation of mine, made with a mix of vegetables."

Mia looked from him to the cake and back again. Her eyes, at first wide with astonishment, quickly curled into crescents as she tried a bite. The sight of her beaming, cheeks bulging with cake, delighted him. He watched her chew until, with her deep sigh of satisfaction, his delight blossomed into a profound sense of fulfilment. He knew then that he'd truly given it his all. He had at last poured the entirety of his heart and soul into cooking for the girl before him. And she acknowledged this fact. With the most sincere smile she could muster given the speed at which she was shoveling cake into her mouth, she looked at him and said, "You've done— Mmm. A wonderful job— Mmmmm. Head Chef. I have the — Mmmmmmm! The utmost respect for your skill!"

This might be...the first time I've thought so deeply...so thoroughly *about cooking for a specific person's tastes...*

In that moment, it all dawned on him. What it meant to be a chef, the sheer depth of the pursuit, and why it was and always would be worth it.

Some time later, after Mia returned to Saint-Noel Academy, Musta received a letter.

"For me... from Her Highness?"

He'd never received a letter from Mia before. Only a privileged few could ever have the honor of receiving a written message from the Princess of Tearmoon, and he was well aware their ranks did not include himself.

"What in the world?"

With utter bewilderment, he unfolded the letter and read through it. A low rumble escaped his throat.

"Head chef? What does it say?" asked one of the cooks.

"It says..." he slowly answered, "that Her Highness would like to incorporate my recipes into the cafeteria menu at Saint-Noel Academy..."

"Really? Wow!"

A wave of commotion spread through the kitchen. Their amazement was understandable. Saint-Noel was the pinnacle of academia on the continent. Located in the Holy Principality of Belluga, it enrolled numerous young nobles from neighboring nations, and there was no shortage of royalty among its student population. In other words, it had arguably the densest concentration of demandingly refined palates on the continent. The food served there, then, had to be equally exceptional. Nothing but the crème de la crème would suffice, and to have the recipes he'd devised selected for Saint-Noel's menu was an honor of the highest magnitude. What pleased Musta, however, was not Saint-Noel's esteem but Mia's recommendation. The fact that she liked his cooking enough to deem it suitable for the academy made him happier than anything else.

It seems that I have indeed gotten through to Her Highness... She truly appreciates what I'm trying to do...

The prestige of having contributed to the academy's menu was doubtlessly grand, but it was the love and appreciation shown by those eating his food that filled him with pride.

"So... What are we going to do, head chef?"

"We'll certainly heed her wishes...but some of these recipes are a little complicated. We'll need to write them out in a fashion that's easy to understand... It might be best to add some pictures as well. All right, go find someone who can draw..."

When he took on a task, he gave it his all. He'd spent countless hours maximizing the benefits of his cooking for both the taste buds and the body. His recipes represented the crystallized fruits of his intense labor. Now it was time to pass them on so they could be thoroughly and accurately inherited by others.

Slowly and thoughtfully, he began setting his knowledge to paper. As an extra perk, he included a new recipe he'd thought of for a different kind of vegetable cake. If the cooks at Saint-Noel were as great as was rumored, then they should have no problem reproducing it.

Thus did his vegetable cake spread far and wide throughout the continent.

Let us hasten the clock again.

The next time Musta Waggman's name appeared in the annals of history was when he was entering his senior years. A ceremony

was underway in the Grand Square of the imperial capital of Lunatear. Guards in stately armor stood shoulder to shoulder like walls of polished metal. The band performed a spirited fanfare in celebration of the auspicious occasion. In the center of the square, standing on a stage covered by scarlet cloth, was a woman. Her long silken hair cascaded down to the middle of her back, glowing like white gold in the sunlight. With eyes as clear as the cloudless sky and deep like bottomless wells of knowledge, the Great Sage of the Empire calmly, quietly, settled her gaze upon Musta.

"Head chef of the imperial court, Musta Waggman, please present yourself!" announced the chancellor standing beside her.

He straightened and walked forward. Stopping a few paces before her, he lowered himself onto his knees in a ritual bow of respect.

"Please accept my deepest gratitude for this exceptional ceremony. I am honored beyond words, Your Highness—"

He choked back the last two words and stared up at her, hands over his mouth.

"I am terribly sorry. Out of habit, I—"

Mia all but giggled at his flustered reaction.

"My, but I find myself quite content to be 'Highness.' Feel free to continue addressing me as such."

Her gaze drifted into the distance.

"Habit indeed... We've known each other a long time... You've served me since I was but a young girl." Then, with renewed verve, she declared in a voice that rang with true majesty, "Musta Waggman, as head chef of the imperial court, your contributions to the empire's dietary culture are numerous and significant. In honor of your work...and in appreciation of your continued dedication over so many years to teach me and my children about the joys of meal and mead..."

She produced a medal with the characteristic rotundity of a mushroom and pinned it on the left side of Musta's chest. It glowed as bright as the full moon.

"I hereby award you the Mia Medal of Freedom."

"I humbly accept this extraordinary honor." He bowed deeply, took a step back, then straightened. With his chin held high and proud, he looked across the crowd gathered there. Though his acceptance was humble, he presented the medal without diffidence, for he knew himself to be worth its weight. He'd withheld no effort,

pouring his heart and soul into every meal he prepared for Mia. There was not a speck of guilt marring his conscience, and the medal felt hefty—but not burdensome—on his chest.

"Now that's done with, I must say, head chef, I'm craving cake for dinner tonight. Preferably sweet ones, and enough to fill me up..."

He heard Mia's voice behind him. Turning, he pulled his lips into a line and replied, "Out of the question. That would be terrible for your health. You must eat a balanced, nutritious meal..."

A twinkle in his eye poked through the stern front. The corner of his lips curled up.

"After that though... I suppose you can try some of this new type of veggie cake I made."

As a continental superpower, the Tearmoon Empire was known for its rich food culture. Dessert, in particular, was an area of cuisine it excelled in. Their quality and variety was unmatched, surpassing even that of the Holy Principality of Belluga. This culinary achievement could largely be attributed to one man who had an outsize influence on its development. His name was Musta Waggman. As head chef of the imperial court, he spent much of his life as the perennial champion of the imperial family's palate. Among the numerous recipes he invented, the most famous and extraordinary were doubtlessly his vegetable sweets. Almost a genre unto themselves, these unique creations turned an assortment of vegetables into mouth-wateringly delicious desserts so beloved that they were permanently added to the official menu of Saint-Noel Academy's prestigious cafeteria.

Equally famous was the widely-retold fact that the Great Sage of the Empire, Mia Luna Tearmoon, loved them dearly as well.

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by Nozomu Mochitsuki

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